

Adventures around the World

Christopher E. Brennen

Dankat Publishing Company

For my grandchildren, Quinn, Troy, Gavin and Payton

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ISBN 0-9667409-5-5

Preface

Warning

It is important to stress that there is always a significant danger associated with adventures into the wilderness. Those who wish to follow the adventure hikes in this book should be fully cognizant of those dangers and take appropriate precautions. The accounts are primarily intended for experienced hikers who will exercise informed judgment and caution. The hikes requiring technical expertise and equipment should never be undertaken without proper training and qualifications. Even given all this, the dangers should not be minimized. The accounts are offered with the understanding that readers will proceed entirely at their own risk. In “Precautions” we describe some of the precautions that minimize (but do not eliminate) the dangers and risks.

Acknowledgments

A large part of my enjoyment of these adventures was derived from the group of young people (and a few oldies) who accompanied me. I am immensely grateful to all of them for their companionship. I especially thank Troy Sette who was born with the instinct for adventure, Clancy Rowley whose grace and kindness shines in all he does, Mark Duttweiler with whom hiking was always a pleasure and Garrett Reisman who taught me to climb and whose friendship I shall treasure for the rest of my days. I should also acknowledge Doug Hart who was a great companion on many early hikes. It was my great good fortune to have hiked with these marvelous young men. And Carl Wassgren, Bob Behnken, Sudipto Sur, Tricia Waniewski, Stuart Gibbs, Al Preston, Robert Uy, Simone Francis, Markus Ehrenguber, Deborah Brennen, Susan Sette, Eric Siering, Randi Poer, John Perry, Scott Smith, Ira Lewis, Nathan Wozny, Nathan Schara, Eric Hale, Ken King, Mark Fitzsimmons, Jane Fontana, Johanna Turner, Bernd Haase, Matt Maxon, Keith Goodfellow and others were marvelous company and quite tolerant of elderly eccentricities. My thanks also Alex Kirkaldy who gave us important guidance in the Big Tujunga region and to my old friends David Wales and Paul Jennings. This book is dedicated to all these fellow adventurers who so enriched my travels in the wilderness and, in particular, to Doug, Troy, Garrett, Simone, Clancy, David, Mark, Randi, Scott and John.

About the Author

Christopher Earls Brennen was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland and emigrated to California in 1969. He has lived and worked in the southwestern United States for over forty years and has spent many great days exploring the marvelous scenic beauty of that corner of the world. In this book he tells of some of the special places that he has explored beyond the ends of the trails, in the canyons and on the summits of the American Southwest.

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Chapter 1

IRELAND

This selection of adventures in my homeland begins with two of my earliest ventures into the wilderness, continues with pilgrimages to two of its most legendary summits and concludes with visits to four of its remarkable islands.



Adventures in Ireland

1.1 Slieve Gallion

- Hiking time: 15 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 24 miles
- Elevation gain: 410 feet
- Topo Map: Sheets 13 (Sperrins) and 14 (Lough Neagh), Discoverer Series, Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland
- Difficulties: Marshy bog land
- Special equipment: Rain gear, waterproof boots
- Permit: None required

Characteristics

Slieve Gallion is the easternmost summit of the Sperrin Mountains in the western part of Northern Ireland. Rising to 1730ft and only the 398th highest mountain in Ireland, it would rank as no more than a small pimple in most landscapes. But the broad flat summit, a blanket bog of wet heather and continual rainfall, is world's away from the green rolling farmland just 1500ft below for, at this high latitude, the weather changes rapidly with elevation. On the southwest, the water runs off into a lovely mountain lake, Lough Fea by name. The crystal clear water has sustained people for thousands of years for, on a small hill in the townland of Ballybriest just 1/4 mile away, there are the remains of several neolithic long cairn graves. The views from there are superb in all directions, northeast to the barren summit of Slieve Gallion, southwest to Lough Fea and far off to the western horizon of the Sperrins. Only important chieftains could have warranted such an immortal view.

Growing up in the village of Magherafelt just a few miles away, Slieve Gallion and Lough Fea represented the only real wilderness within the domain of my ramblings. My father loved to explore the narrow mountain roads that snaked up into the heather and around the lake. We would often take Sunday afternoon drives to places like Carndaisy Glen, a beautiful wooded glade on the slopes of



Left: Slieve Gallion. Right: Ballybriest neolithic cairn.

Slieve Gallion. On a warm summer Sunday, a picnic might be planned for the glen or for the shores of Lough Fea itself. We especially liked the wooded near-island that jutted out from the south shore of the lough, a mound with a symmetry that suggested some ancient human shaping. I remember one Sunday in June 1952 when my youngest brother Colin, aged six, nearly drowned and my father dived deep into Lough Fea to recover and revive him. And every few winters, as in 1955, there would be a spell of weather cold enough that Lough Fea would freeze over and we would mount an ice skating expedition.

Trailhead and Hike

The year of 1958 marked my last as a Boy Scout for I had found many other diversions. However, before leaving, I had striven to complete one of the more advanced “badges” or awards that scouts could earn. One of the requirements for that badge was to undertake an overnight hike in a desolate area. The obvious choice was an adventure on Slieve Gallion. Peter Burton was a class mate and a fellow member of the local scout troop and he and I formed a plan for the overnight hike. We would hike the five miles from Magherafelt along the local roads to Carndaisy Glen ($54^{\circ}42.77'N$, $6^{\circ}41.55'W$) where we knew of some grassy camping spots by the stream that ran through the glen. On our way to Carndaisy Glen, I recall that we may have cheated a little by accepting a ride on a tractor for several miles. In any case we pitched our tent by the stream in the glen and cooked some flapjacks (made from flour, butter and water, I think) on the hot rock beside our camp fire before turning in for the night.

In the morning, after breakfast, we set off up the lovely glen as it climbed onto the slopes of Slieve Gallion. I particularly remember the patches of iridescent bluebells. Perhaps it was they that caused me in the years that followed to associate flowers with Slieve Gallion. Indeed, when I took up oil painting many years later, my first effort was entitled “Flowers on the way to Slieve Gallion”. Though it is of little artistic merit, I still keep that painting tucked away in a closet.

To return to the hike, we emerged from the top of the glen and transitioned onto the heather-covered moor land that covers most of the high ground on the mountain. Here the going got tougher for there were fewer tracks to follow and the heath land was mostly soggy underfoot. As we reached the broad summit of the mountain ($54^{\circ}44.21'N$, $6^{\circ}44.50'W$ and elevation 1460ft), it began to rain and the day became quite miserable. We slogged our way across seemingly endless moor land, the rain having penetrated all of our clothing. Peter became quite dispirited and I can recall having to urge him on. It was my first experience of wilderness loneliness, my first sense of being at the mercy of nature. Not that I felt much fear for, even then, I had great confidence in both my physical endurance and in my navigational ability. It probably only took a few hours but after three miles of off-road travel we were back on established trails and descending the other side of the mountain. Once we reached paved road (at $54^{\circ}44.95'N$, $6^{\circ}45.63'W$ and elevation 1070ft) again, I regained confidence that we could complete the last four miles of the hike without having to call for

assistance. Coincidentally, the sun came out and I recall sauntering down the mountain road with satisfaction in my accomplishment while also reveling in the beauty of the drying countryside. We completed the hike by road through Desertmartin and back to Magherafelt with plenty of daylight to spare. That adventure was my first real challenge in the outdoors and one whose success stayed with me the rest of my life. It also created a special affection within me for Slieve Gallion, the mountain that would witness other moments of joy and sadness during my life.

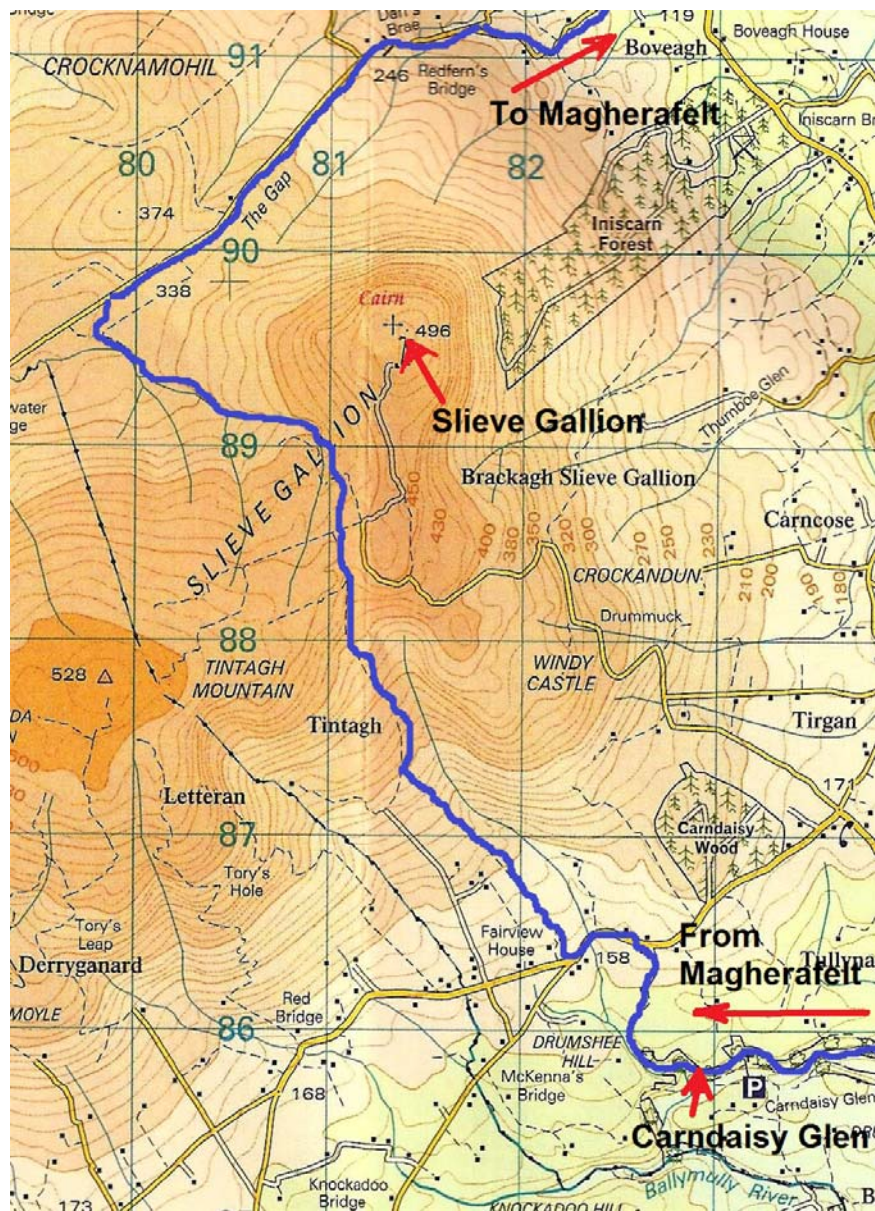
Epilogue

Corporal Albert Symonds was killed on July 15, 1944, at the fierce battle for Caen, just after the Normandy landings in France that began the end of the Second World War. He was just 26 and left behind a wife and very young daughter, Laverne, just over a year old. Laverne grew up in a small market town in the shadow of Slieve Gallion, a place called Cookstown. She was raised by her mother, Gertrude Symonds, and her grandmother who were very protective of her welfare. They lived in a terrace house on the west side of Oldtown Street in Cookstown and, when she was old enough, Laverne attended the Rainey Endowed School in Magherafelt. There, in the autumn of 1958, I first became aware of this skinny girl with the sultry smile. I was infatuated by her languid sexuality and in a few months we became high school sweethearts. She was the only woman with whom I had a significant relationship before I met my wife and that was several years later, after I had left high school. Laverne and I had a mercuric relationship, sometimes on, sometimes off. It seemed to me that she no sooner had me in tow than she would become interested in another boy. But we shared many special moments whose memory could not but stay with me down through the years. I remember one spring afternoon, March 22, 1959, when we drove to Lough Fea and walked and talked along the lake shore and among the neolithic gravestones. A year later, at Easter 1960, we visited London together where she stayed with relations in High Barnet and I roomed in the YMCA in central London. However, in the summer of that year, our two year relationship came to an end for, in July 1960, I met and fell in love with Doreen.

In 1961 Laverne entered Queens University, Belfast where she became the second woman in the history of that university to earn a Civil Engineering degree. I think the last time I saw her was in 1962 when Doreen and I encountered her briefly while walking along University Street on the Belfast campus. After graduation she took an administrative job in a university library. In Belfast, she met and married David Haskins, a teacher, and they had a son, Michael. After Michael's birth Laverne suffered severe post-partum depression and never returned to work; David believes she never fully recovered. She and David were separated and Laverne lived the rest of her life in Lisburn with Michael while David moved to a terraced house in Belfast. Michael became a musician, a guitarist with a group called Maya.

But I knew little of what had become of her after graduation. There were many moments when I thought to make contact with her out of curiosity more than anything else. But I could never quite justify such a contact as long as there was even the remotest possibility that Doreen might be hurt. Finally, however, in the year 2004, while visiting Northern Ireland, I acquired David Haskins' telephone number and called him to enquire as to how I might get in touch with Laverne. He informed me that Laverne had died of ovarian cancer on July 11, 2004, just a month earlier. After more than 40 years, I had reached back a month too late.

Her son and her mother were with her when she died. She was cremated on July 15, the date on which her father had been killed. Several days later, in accord with her wishes, her ashes were scattered to the winds at the Ballybriest neolithic cairn overlooking Lough Fea. A month later I stood alone in the rain and placed flowers on those ancient stones. Flowers on the way to Slieve Gallion.



Map of Slieve Gallion hike

1.2 Moyola River

- Kayaking time: 8 hours
- Estimated kayaking distance: 9.5 miles
- Elevation gain: None
- Topo Map: Sheets 13 (Sperrins) & 14 (Lough Neagh), Discoverer Series, Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland
- Special equipment: Kayak(s) and paddles, wetsuits, life-jackets, drybags
- Permit: None

Characteristics

In the early 1950s my father decided to construct a two-man canoe in which to paddle the waters of some bucolic Irish river. I think the inspiration for this was derived from a canoeing holiday that one of my uncles had enjoyed on a river in southern Ireland. Indeed my father seemed to have inherited the remains of my uncles collapsible canoe that consisted of a foldable canvas shell within which a frame of wooden rods was to be assembled. However, we never managed to complete this assembly and so my father decided to construct his own canoe that would not be collapsible. It would still be canvas on a wooden frame but a rigid rather than removable frame.

This new canoe was constructed in one of the attic rooms in our house. It was carefully fabricated and a few test paddles were nervously but successfully conducted in a nearby pond. After that my father's interest waned and he moved on to other activities. However, a year or two later, I had just begun my lifelong adventuring with a hike over the top of Slieve Gallion (see previous adventure). Casting around for more adventure, my friend Frank Johnston and I decided to see how far we could float down the nearby Moyola River in the "new" canoe.



Left: Looking downstream from starting point. Right: Curran bridge.

The Moyola was the only river of any size close to Magherafelt. Rising near Mullaghturk peak in the Sperrin Mountains, the Moyola winds its way through the rolling farmland of southeast County Derry for 27 miles before emptying into Lough Neagh. A little preliminary scouting revealed that the river upstream of the road bridge on the Tobermore/Maghera road (at $54^{\circ}47.150'N$, $6^{\circ}41.903'W$) was too shallow for reasonable canoeing and so we decided to put in at that point and canoe downstream. We knew of several other road bridges further downstream and had reconnoitered the river from those vantage points; but we had little information on the river in between those viewpoints. Nevertheless, with the confidence of youth, we decided that we knew enough. Therefore, in the early summer of 1959, we began preparations for this canoeing adventure into the unknown. What attracted me to this exploit, indeed to all the adventures in the fifty plus years that followed, was precisely the thrill of venturing into the unknown, of finding out what was round the next corner or over the next hill and of meeting the challenges that revealed themselves.

Having obtained my father's approval to use his canoe and his willingness to deposit us at our starting point, we began collecting the gear we would need. Food and water were obvious. But we also knew that the canvas surface of the canoe was not particularly rugged; it could easily be penetrated if we made contact with rocks in the shallower parts of the river. Fortunately, we knew of adhesive and waterproof bandage tape called "Elastoplast" that my father made valuable use of in his doctoring activities. We obtained a liberal supply of Elastoplast from that source and set off one Saturday morning for the Tobermore/Maghera road bridge (at $54^{\circ}47.150'N$, $6^{\circ}41.903'W$).

Trailhead and River Run

I do remember the mild but exciting apprehension with which we slid the loaded canoe into the water downstream of the Tobermore/Maghera road bridge in preparation for departure. It was a beautiful, sunny Irish day. To the west of us the heather-encrusted Sperrin Mountains glowed purple in the sunlight and all around the lush green fields seemed to welcome us. As long as rain and



Left: Upstream of first weir. Right: First weir.

misfortune stayed away it promised to be a glorious day. We bade goodbye to my father (who must have wondered if he would ever see his canoe again) and started downstream, Frank in front and me behind. Not much paddling was needed but we soon encountered the first of many small rapids, some of which we needed to wade in order to negotiate. Inevitably the first rip in the canvas occurred, the Elastoplast came out and the canoe received its first badge of honor. On we drifted with kingfishers flashing past us and startled herons rising majestically before us. Though farm fields lay all around I don't think we saw a single person all day long. The river was its own sanctuary and we felt we should slip respectfully through this ribbon of near-wilderness. More riffles were encountered and negotiated but the bottom of the canoe began to look like a canvas war-zone; the Elastoplast supply was dwindling fast. We passed the junction with the Grange Water at $54^{\circ}47.990'N$, $6^{\circ}36.486'W$ and pressed on downstream.

Several hours into our adventure and just beyond the Grange Water junction, we came to the lovely old Curran bridge, named after the nearby hamlet that recorded a population of 130 in the 2001 Census. A beautiful old stone, four-arch bridge carrying a single lane across the Moyola (at $54^{\circ}47.980'N$, $6^{\circ}36.758'W$), the Curran bridge must date back at least to the 1800s if not before. Instantly recognized, we floated through it relieved to know where we were. The river was now fuller and easier to traverse. However, a little over $1/4$ mile downstream of the Curran bridge we came to an old weir or dam (at $54^{\circ}47.785'N$, $6^{\circ}35.115'W$) that dropped about 6ft in two stages. Throughout Ireland (and indeed Europe) dams like this were built in conjunction with a race, a diversion of part of the flow used to drive a water wheel and mill to process the local agricultural produce. They represented the first mechanization, the first industry, and were an essential and fundamental step in the development of civilization. The sluice gate that regulated the flow into the race of this first weir is still extant though overgrown and long forgotten. During our long-ago adventure this weir was our first significant obstacle and initially caused us some trepidation. But it was easily portaged and we were soon on our way.



Left: Moyola House weir. Right: Weak bridge.

Not far downstream of that first weir we found ourselves surrounded by woods. Indeed, until the middle of the 1700s, this whole region of County Derry was a dense forest, celebrated for being the haunt of wolves. The last wild wolf is reputed to have been killed in the middle of the 18th century. Part of that forest was obtained by the settler Thomas Dawson in 1633 and became the private domain and estate of the Dawson family who called it Moyola Park. As with many of the private estates of the landed aristocracy in Ireland, a substantial stone wall was built around this domain in the 1800s. The purpose was twofold - to clearly define that estate and to provide some employment and relief during the terrible years of the famine. Most of these tall stone walls remain. While the relief they provided is long forgotten, their stark statement of segregation still resonates, still generates inevitable resentment.

On that day in 1959, we did not know when we entered Moyola Park and the demense of the Dawsons for there was no stone wall across the river nor any other sign of the boundary (modern GPS tell us that boundary was at 54°47.510'N, 6°34.115'W) along our route. We did suspect that we had entered grounds where we were not welcome but it was still a surprise when we suddenly found ourselves floating past the manicured lawn at the foot of a great mansion. We ducked down to reduce the possibility of being seen as we floated by, trailing streamers of Elastoplast in our wake. My mother would have been mortified if she had known where we were!

The great house in Moyola Park, the seat of the Dawson family, was built in 1713 by Joshua Dawson who was the Chief Secretary of Ireland in 1710. Both the house and the adjacent village became known as Castledawson. Joshua's descendant, George Robert Dawson (1790-1856), son of Arthur Dawson, was born at Castledawson, and married Mary Peel, the daughter of the British Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel. Their son, Robert Peel Dawson (1818-1877), was the father of Mary Dawson, who became the heir to the Moyola estate. Mary was the great-grandmother of the brothers James Chichester-Clark (1923-2002) and Robin Chichester-Clark (1928-) who grew up in Moyola Park. Robin was the MP for Londonderry in the British House of Commons from 1955 until 1974. After an army career, James retired to Moyola Park in 1959. He was a member of the Northern Ireland Parliament for South Londonderry for 12 years beginning at the by-election to replace his grandmother Dehra Parker in 1960. James went on to become the penultimate Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. He married the widowed Moyra Haughton (they had two daughters). In the aftermath of his political career James was created Lord Moyola in 1971 and died in 2002. Though the father of James and Robin Chichester-Clark died in 1933, their mother, Marion Caroline Dehra Chichester-Clark, lived at Moyola Park until she died in 1976.

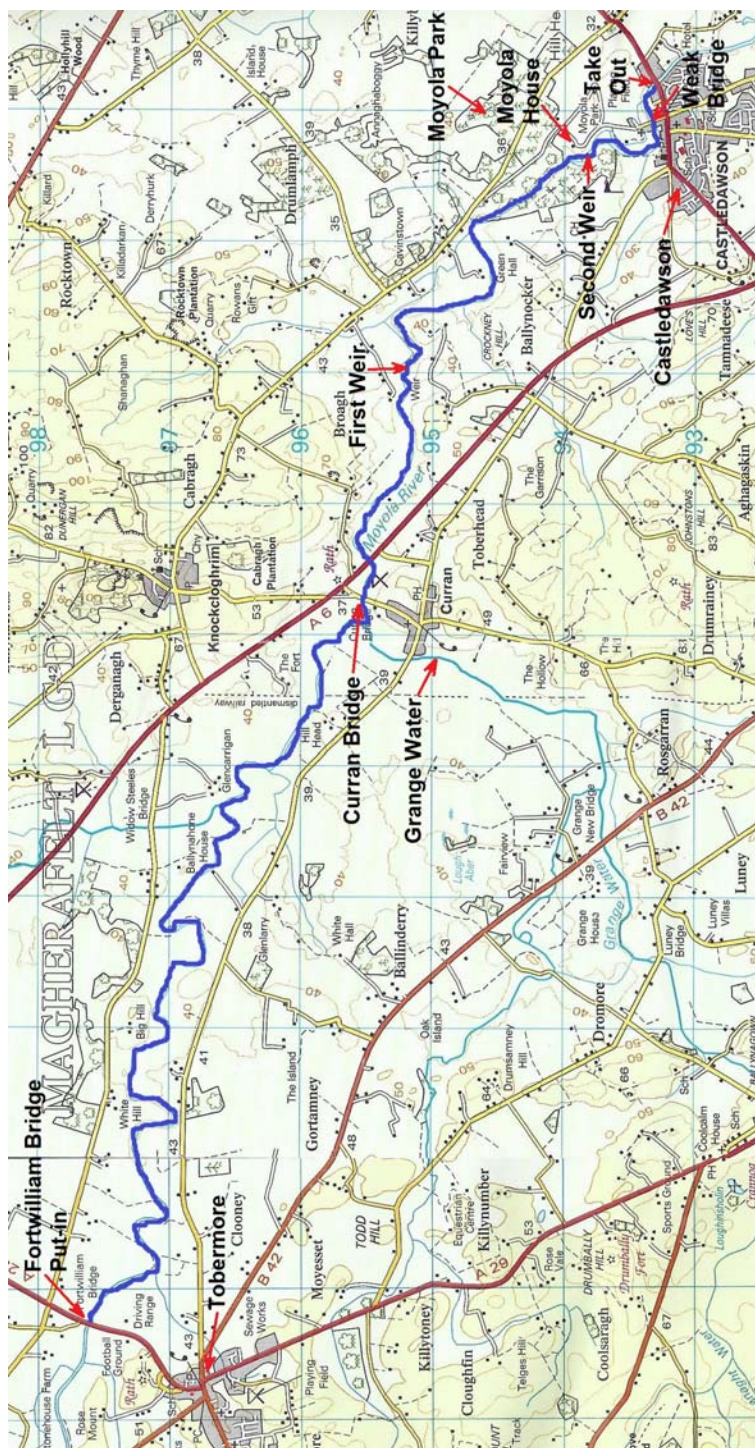
Therefore, as far as I can tell, at the time of our adventure in 1959, the Moyola Park mansion was occupied by the 55-year-old widow, Marion Chichester-Clark, though her son, James, would shortly be moving in with his family. Of course, neither Frank nor I had any clue as to who lived in the great house that neither of us had ever seen before. But the drift of the river and the need for silent passage left us little alternative but to slip past as quietly as possible.

Just a few yards beyond the house, the Moyola encounters its second weir (at $54^{\circ}47.014'N$, $6^{\circ}33.634'W$), a larger drop than the first weir. We portaged around this on the right-hand side, the side furthest from the house that, I believe, was now out of sight. Continuing downstream through the woods, we negotiated several small rapids before signs that we had left the park were encountered. Soon we came upon an old, somewhat familiar single-arch bridge ($54^{\circ}46.749'N$, $6^{\circ}33.407'W$).

This stone bridge over the Moyola connects Castledawson village to the wooded Dawson demense. Built in 1796 by Joshua Dawson, it replaced an earlier wooden bridge that was carried away by a flood in 1795. It has a single arch spanning 116ft, once the widest single span bridge in Ireland. Today that bridge is signposted "Weak Bridge" presumably because the arch would have difficulty supporting heavy modern vehicles. At that time in 1796 the road leading down to the Weak Bridge from the village (Bridge Street) was the main road to the neighboring village of Bellaghy, a few miles to the northeast. But to preserve their privacy when they built the enclosure wall around their property in the mid-1800s, the Dawsons diverted that route around the outside of their domain. The present Castledawson/Hillhead road bridge over the Moyola was built at that time.

By the time we passed under the Weak Bridge we, too, had been weakened by the struggles with the weirs and other small rapids. It was also getting cold as night approached. Moreover, our supply of Elastoplast was now completely exhausted and the bottom of the canoe was beyond repair. I remember struggling unnecessarily with one small rapid where the canoe drifted sideways and filled with water. It was time to end the adventure. The next bridge just a short way downstream of the Weak Bridge was the road bridge carrying the Castledawson/Hillhead road (at $54^{\circ}46.733'N$, $6^{\circ}33.134'W$) and here I climbed up to the road, found a telephone and called my father to ask him to come and get us. I recall he was none too pleased with the soaking wet load he had to transport home; nor was he pleased with the condition of the canoe. But it had experienced an adventure greater than that for which it was built - and given us a taste for adventure that would last a lifetime.

Frank went on to college in England and to establishing a business in South Africa and Malawi. He became well-known for his photographs of those countries and for his unofficial diplomacy. His book of photographs of Malawi entitled "Malawi. The Warm Heart of Africa", became Malawi's window on the world. He once asked me to circumnavigate Lake Malawi with him on a photographic expedition but other commitments prevented me from accepting his marvelous invitation. I dearly wish I been able to accept for we were fellow travelers in the realm of adventure.



Map of Moyola adventure

1.3 Errigal

- Hiking time: 3 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3 miles
- Elevation gain: 1630 feet
- Topo Map: Sheet 1 (North Donegal), 1:126720 Series, Ordnance Survey of Ireland
- Permit: None required

Characteristics

Falcarragh. The name of this desolate little village in the extreme northwest corner of Ireland conjures up a host of haunting memories for me, memories of a bleak rain streaked landscape, of ancient Celtic tragedies and of a strange and impoverished people. When I was young my father and mother, always adventurous people, would arrange to rent a cottage on the edge of one of the deep inlets along this convoluted coast. We would load up one of our two cars with every possible kitchen and bedroom need and set off west from our home in Derry for the wilds of County Donegal. In those days there were many formalities to follow at the international border just west of the city of Derry. Thereafter, as the landscape bleakened and the roads became rough and narrow, we would travel beyond the reach of English hegemony into sparsely populated Donegal, “Dun na nGall” or the “Fort of the Foreigners” (the name derives from the fact that the Vikings founded the town of Donegal).

But, of course, there was a substantial intermediate zone in which English rule held some sway and the market towns relied for their prosperity on the economic giant to the east. Because of those commercial pressures, English had long ago supplanted Gaelic as the mother tongue. Only the extreme northwest



Left: Clouds shroud the peak of Errigal. Right: Ruined church overlooking Dunlewy Lake.

corner of Donegal, the area around Falcarragh, Gweedore, Gortahork and including Tory Island, was isolated enough to avoid those pressures. There to this day, Gaelic is still the native language of about 30,000 inhabitants. The region is known as the “Gaeltacht” and its boundary represents a distinct border within Ireland. If you drive from Dunfanaghy to Falcarragh, you will pass a road sign, “An Gaeltacht”, marking the boundary of this area.

None of the holiday cottages were in the Gaeltacht for that would have been too strange, too foreign. The closest we came was a very rustic cottage near Dunfanaghy, a town remembered for its workhouse, one of those terrible places that were the only refuge for the starving and destitute created by the Great Famine in the 1840s. Indeed the famine hit the Gaeltacht particularly hard because the poverty of that region left little margin between subsistence and destitution. So at the height of the famine 600 starving and dying people were packed into the small workhouse buildings. Today the workhouse is a tourist attraction that tells the wrenching story of “Wee” Hannah Herrity. Born in Falcarragh about 1835, Hannah had to deal with an abusive stepmother after her mother died in childbirth during the famine. Escaping from that torment, Hannah wandered from place to place in northwest Donegal. Without any home she found temporary employment and shelter on several farms before illness gave her no alternative but the confines of the workhouse. Somehow she survived and spent many years roaming the roads as a beggar. Finally, late in life, her plight came to the attention of a Mrs. Law, wife of the local MP, who had a small cottage built for Hannah. The entire community rallied round to equip the one-room cottage with the essentials and provide Hannah with a moment of real joy. Hannah died in her cottage at the age of 90. The story presented in the tourist tableau is in Hannah’s own words, and it reaffirms one’s conviction that though the policy of the English Government toward the famine may have been understandable, it was unforgivable.

When we holidayed there it was a sparsely populated region and one of great natural beauty. Most of the population lived in a narrow coastal strip. The hinterland consisted of windswept heaths, lakes and dramatic rocky uplands. Towering over the Gaeltacht is the highest mountain in Donegal, a steep-sided quartzite cone called Errigal whose scree slopes rise dramatically above the heather-coated uplands just inland from Falcarragh. My father loved to explore



Left: The route to the summit. Right: View from the summit.

this rugged landscape though I can recall the apprehension with which he crossed into the Gaeltacht. Once in Falcarragh he would find the little dirt road that led inland to skirt the slopes of Errigal. He would follow that a few miles to the tiny hamlet of Dunlewy on the shores of a lovely tree-lined lake. The valley beyond Dunlewy Lake presented a delightful panorama known as the Poisoned Glen, always a place of mystery, in part because of the name and in part because no road penetrated it. Many years later when I tried to find the origin of the name, I was not surprised to uncover a multitude of explanations. Perhaps the least attractive was the claim that the Glen was once home to a toxic plant, Irish Spurge Moss or “Euphorbia”, that exuded a poisonous sap and polluted the water of the glen. As evidence these reports point to the absence of birds and the resulting profusion of insect life during the summer months. A much more likely explanation is that the Irish word for poison, “neimhe”, is only one letter different from the word for heaven, “neamh”. It is said that the glen used to be called the “Heavenly Glen” by the local people and that the mapmaker (English of course!) screwed up. But the explanation favored by most people, tells the story of Balor, a king on Tory Island, and his beautiful daughter. So beautiful in fact that Balor felt compelled to imprison her in a tower so that she would not come within sight of men. But the fame of her looks spread and men came from far and wide to attempt to see and woo the beautiful princess. Eventually, one gallant succeeded in capturing her and spiriting her back to the mainland, up into the mountain fastness around Errigal. Balor followed the pair across the sea and up the valley into the Poisoned Glen. There he killed the captor with a giant stone that now stands at the entrance to the Glen. That stone is said to be the evil, or “poisoned” eye of Balor. And hence the Poisoned Glen.

At the end of the road at the entrance to the Poisoned Glen and just past Dunlewy village stand the mute ruins of a church. The walls of this haunting edifice are still complete. Indeed the white marble of which it was built was quarried just a few hundred yards away; the marble glows in the soft Irish light. Adding to the mystery, the adjacent graveyard contains a single gravestone. Unlike the Glen one can find few willing to offer explanations for the demise of this church. At one time it served as the local parish church and was thus part of the English establishment. Some may suggest that it was abandoned for the want of a congregation. Others will point to the new church built further down the valley after the old church became a ruin. Few will venture near the old church for it is said to be haunted. If it was burnt down in a fit of anger by a crazed survivor of the workhouse, many would know but none would tell. But its mute and haunting testimony is inescapable.

Trailhead

Perhaps it is not surprising that these hosts of memories keep drawing me back to this enchanted place. In previous years I had splashed my way up into the Poisoned Glen, hiking to its glacier-sculpted head. In the year 2002, I returned, this time for a symbolic pilgrimage to the summit of Errigal. I drove through

Falcarragh early one Sunday morning when not a soul was stirring and found the now-paved road that leads up to Dunlewy. Errigal loomed on the left and Dunlewy Lake slipped by on the right as I approached the Poisoned Glen. The road now continues to climb past Dunlewy (the village is down a narrow side road) and past the entrance to the Glen, headed for a saddle that lies to the south of Errigal. I stopped short of the saddle at a small trailhead parking area (55°1.50'N, 8°5.39'W and elevation 735ft) on the left side of the road about 4 miles from the N58/R251 intersection.

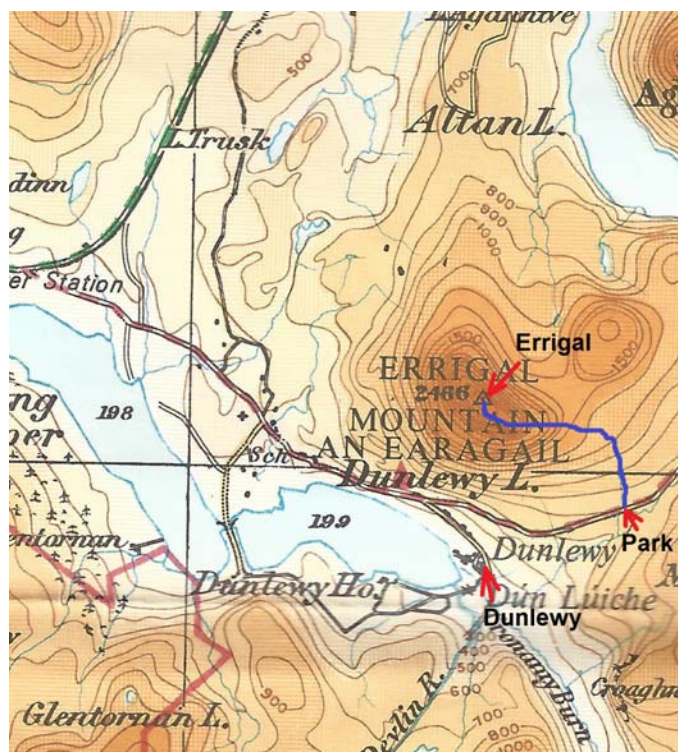
Hike

The route up the southeast ridge of Errigal is clearly evident from the trailhead (55°1.50'N, 8°5.39'W and elevation 735ft) and begins with a hike up through the boggy heather on the left side of a small stream. The going here is very wet and mushy. After about half a mile, you veer left and follow braided trails through the heather heading for the obvious rocky trail on the slope ahead. Once there, you transition to a steep rocky trail that follows the southeast ridge of the mountain. Views open up of Croloughan Lake across the other side of the valley saddle and of the Poisoned Glen off to the south among the Derryveagh mountains. Beyond the Derryveagh range is Glenveagh National Park, previously the domain of the English landlord John Adair who, in 1861, evicted 244 tenants and cleared the land so as not to mar the views on his estate.

As you move onto the apex of the southeast ridge, the landscape to the east and north also comes into view with Altan Lake far below between Errigal and the summit of Aghla More (1916ft). Muckish Mountain (2197ft), the site of an annual barefoot pilgrimage on St. Patrick's Day, is a little further away beyond Aghla More. As you near the summit of Errigal, you surmount a shoulder where there is a large rock shelter and a cairn. From there it is a short way up a narrowing ridge to the 2466ft summit of Errigal (55°2.00'N, 8°6.67'W). In fact there are two sharp peaks on a narrow ridge 25yds apart, the trail between them being known as "One Man's Path". Provided you do not find yourself in the clouds (often the case), the panorama from the top is spectacular in all directions. Off to the north and northwest you will now see the Atlantic Coast and fabled Tory Island. It takes only about 1hr 15min to reach the summit of Errigal and less than 1hr to descend again.

If only it were that easy to right those centuries of wrong, or even to put them behind us. Like that 1690ft hike to the top of Errigal, it seems like a simple thing to do, to start afresh and build a vibrant economic future. To any experienced hiker 1690ft is almost trivial. And yet when I climbed Errigal a fierce cold wind was howling out of the east. I was barely able to put one foot in front of the other without losing my balance. And the rain hammered into my clothes and face so fiercely, I could only with difficulty look up to see where I was going. I asked myself why in the name of God was I continuing in the face of this maelstrom. And yet when I came to that summit ridge, the wind was miraculously gone and the beauty of the world around me vindicated all

my efforts. I could not help wondering whether Hannah felt that way about her cottage. As she said: “Deed aye, it’s the heart that matters”.



Map of Errigal hike

1.4 Slemish

- Hiking time: 1.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 0.8 miles
- Elevation gain: 620 feet
- Topo Map: Sheet 9 (Ballymena, Larne), Discoverer Series, Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland
- Difficulties: Moderately steep grassy slope
- Permit: None

Characteristics

A large fraction of my ancestors lived out their lives on the narrow strip of coastal land around the northeast corner of Ireland, along the coast of County Antrim. The Dicks and Dales, the McCloyes and the Earls, peoples mostly of Scottish heritage, eked out a livelihood from the land and the sea, farming in one season and fishing in the next. Undoubtedly there was also a little smuggling and some illicit distilling. The only viable means for traveling any distance was by sea and so their lines of communication and commerce were along the coast and across the Irish sea to Scotland rather than overland to the interior of Ireland. This was especially the case along the Antrim coast for just inland from the coastal strip rose a substantial escarpment edged by basalt cliffs and topped with bleak and forbidding moor land. Of course, as the rich coastal land became crowded, the poorer families would be forced up onto these moors or at least to the parts where the drainage was sufficient to allow some meager farming. Huddled in their stone cottages, constantly buffeted by the wind and the rain, these hardy people would have lived quite isolated lives, answerable to no-one beyond their own tightly knit community.



Left: Slemish from afar. Right: Slemish and the road to the trailhead.

Rising dramatically out of this moor land plateau are the eroded remains of a prehistoric volcano, a plug of basalt with steep sides and a flat, rounded top. Known by its ancient Celtic name, Slemish, the 1437ft high mountain can be seen from thirty miles away on a clear day, though one must admit there are few such days in this misty land. Instantly recognizable by its prominence and unusual shape, it was the focus of local myths and legends far back into prehistoric time. But it acquired a very special place in Irish folklore and history during the days of St. Patrick.

Born in Britain about 385AD, Patricius or Patrick was one of the last generations of Britons with Roman heritage. His father, Calpornius, is believed to have been a churchman. At the age of sixteen Patrick was kidnapped by Irish raiders, carried back to Ireland and sold as a slave to a chieftain called Miliucc. He was put to work as a shepherd tending sheep on Slemish mountain. During his six years as a slave he underwent profound spiritual development, in which prayers on the mountain top became a major part of his life. After six years, he escaped and traveled by boat to France before returning to his family in Britain. There he had a dream in which he believed he heard the Irish calling for him to return, a call that he interpreted as coming from God. To prepare for this calling, Patrick traveled to Auxerre in France where he studied with Germanus and was ordained as a deacon. Finally, in 432 he was consecrated a bishop and began his mission to Ireland. During his years in Ireland as a traveling apostle he effected a remarkable religious conversion among the Irish people, an achievement that continues to be recognized and celebrated down to the present day. The germination of that great movement is Patrick's epiphany and, in the Irish tradition, that transformation is closely connected with Slemish mountain. So it is that today, on every St. Patrick's Day, every March 17th, a religious service is held on the summit of Slemish to commemorate his life and work.

Patrick's writings, his "Confessions" and "Letters to Coroticus", continue to be the focus of detailed study and interpretation. Once seen as the works of a barely literate rustic, more recent scholarly evaluations consider them a powerful manifestation of his commitment and spiritual depth. Moreover, in some respects Patrick was more than a millennium ahead of his time, especially in his condemnation of slavery. Thomas Cahill writes that "... the greatness of Patrick (St. Patrick) is beyond dispute: the first human being in the history of the world to speak out unequivocally against slavery." A powerful legacy indeed.

In my youthful travels through County Antrim, I would often, on a clear day, glance across the rolling hills at the profile of Slemish and think idly of climbing to the summit. My inspiration was in part its prominence and in part its legend; but this was never quite enough to produce any action. However, after the death of my own son Patrick in a terrible automobile accident in California, the life and legends of St. Patrick took on a new relevance and meaning for me. Thus it was that I resolved to climb to the summit of Slemish at some point during a visit to my homeland.

One day in August 2002, when Doreen and I were exploring the coast of County Antrim, we had both the time and the opportunity to satisfy this whim.

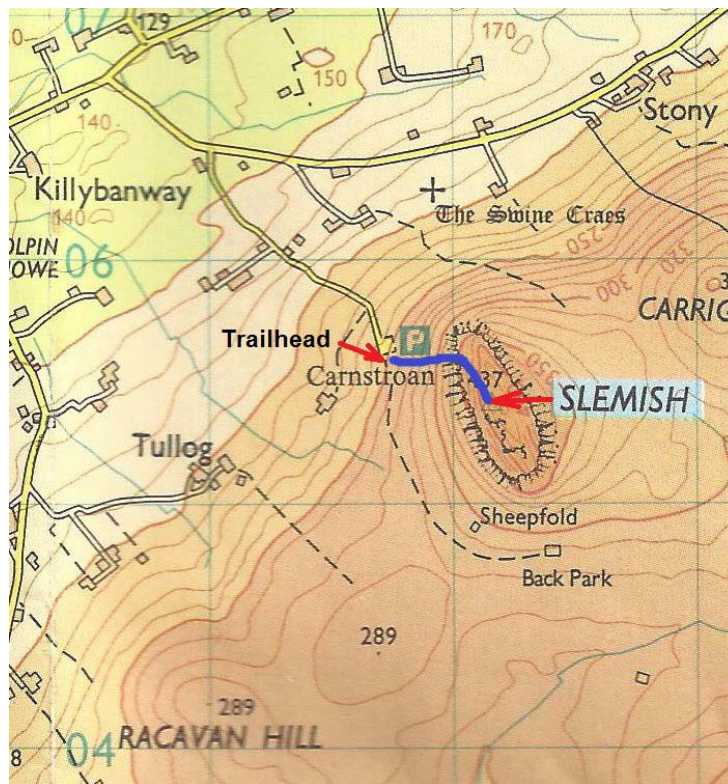
From the coastal village of Glenarm we drove up through one of the most beautiful of the renowned Glens of Antrim, past South Munie where my McCloy ancestors farmed, and onto the bleak moor land on top of the escarpment. Heading west the narrow mountain roads gradually took us down to drumlin-rolling hills dotted with tiny farms and a patchwork of small fields. We soon discerned the unmistakable shape of Slemish. But it took some rather intuitive navigation to negotiate the maze of small roads around the north side of Slemish and some trial and error before we located the route to the trailhead on the west side of the mountain. We later recognized that the approach from the west, starting in the town of Broughshane, would have been much easier; it is even signposted.

As well as a large stone shelter and restrooms, the trailhead (54°52.98'N, 6°6.26'W and elevation 810ft) includes information on St. Patrick, on the geology and on the trails to the top. The summit trail heads directly up a modest slope to the base of a steep incline with many braided trails. On a rainy day like I encountered, this steep incline needs care for the rock and the mud provide for uncertain steps. But it is still a very short climb and soon one is clambering over less steep but grassy banks toward the flat 1437ft summit. The climb takes about 35min. On a clear day it is said that the panoramic view from the top of Slemish is inspiring. Some say that they have been able to see the tops of the Glens of Antrim, even the mountains of Scotland about 30 miles away. And to the west, the distant Sperrin Mountains in County Derry may reportedly be visible. More realistically one can look down from the summit and see the circular fields that date from the time of St. Patrick or before. Then the woods would have been cleared by hand. The fields may even have belonged to the chief Miliucc, Patrick's owner. A modern cottage stands on the site of Miliucc's stronghold; ironically this cottage is available for rent by visitors.

But I could see none of this for the mist allowed only a few yards of sight. Around me lay the flat earth and summit rock (54°52.85'N, 6°5.81'W and elevation 1430ft) where St. Patrick spent years in prayer and thought. In the ancient tradition of the Irish the rock was covered by coins jammed in every crevice, balanced on every flat surface. I took a Lincoln penny from my pocket and placed it with all the others for my Patrick had been the essence of an American boy. The rain dripped down the hood of my weatherproof jacket, masking the tears that fell for my beloved son. Time does not heal all wounds; there are some that one lives with for all time.

But Doreen was waiting for me back at the trailhead and I reflected, as I often do on such occasions, that the part of our son that was most alive was our precious family memory of him. And so it was that I sighed and turned to leave, intent on departing the darkness of the summit and resolved to hasten to that person and that place where I could find comfort and the echo of my Patrick. I hurried down the grassy slope and the steep incline, even jogged across the field just above the trailhead. Doreen had been watching for me to emerge from the mist, concerned about both my physical and emotional well-being. We hugged and hastened into the warmth of the car. Soon we were speeding across the moor land toward a family welcome.

I could not tell you what I accomplished that afternoon; but there seemed some rightness to the moment. Perhaps it was that I had brought the memory of my son back to the home of his ancestors and to the place of his namesake. Perhaps, on the other hand, I was just being self-indulgent. I am not sure that it matters whether or not I can distinguish between the two for I shall for ever be slave to both.



Map of Slemish hike

1.5 Church Island

- Hiking time: 1 hour
- Estimated hiking distance: 1.2 miles
- Elevation gain: 4 feet
- Topo Map: Sheet 14 (Lough Neagh), Discoverer Series, Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland
- Difficulties: Wading through marsh, sometimes shin deep
- Special equipment: Waders
- Permit: None required

Characteristics

These stories began in my childhood home of southeast County Derry and it is appropriate to recount the story of another hike long delayed. As a young boy one of the mystical places near to my home village of Magherafelt was an island in a small shallow lake called Lough Beg. The river Bann drains the largest lake in the British isles, Lough Neagh, starting at Toomebridge just a few miles northeast of Magherafelt. It flows north eventually reaching the sea on the north coast. But just a couple of miles north of Toomebridge it widens briefly to form a much smaller lake called Lough Beg, some 3 miles long and one mile wide. (Geologists tell us that our iconic and storied river, the Moyola, once drained into Lough Beg but that a long-forgotten flood changed its course so that it now empties into Lough Neagh.)

Close to the west Coast of Lough Beg is a small island called Church Island with the ruins of an old church and a history of religious activity. Local legend has it that St.Patrick visited the island in the fifth century and, kneeling in prayer, left an imprint in a stone known as the Bullaun Stone. That stone has a



Church Island from the road and halfway across the marsh.

hollow that holds water and today remains a object of reverence. What is better established is that a man called Thaddeus came to the island where he founded a church and monastic settlement; the traditional name for both the island and the church is Inish Taoide, Toide being Irish for Thaddeus (Thaddeus is said to be buried against the inner wall of the church). Since the Vikings sailed up the Bann on their raids of Irish settlements, it is unlikely that Inish Taoide escaped their predations. However it survived and is mentioned in the Annals of Inis Fallon in 1112 and in the Annals of Ulster in 1129. In later years the monks were of the Dominican religious order. Traces of herbs and rare mints grown by the monks for cures are still found there today. The Church on the island acted as the parish Church until it was burned down during the plantation of Ulster; by 1603 the Church was nearly in ruins. In the year 1642 the Church, already close to ruin, was taken over by the military and a regiment of soldiers was billeted there. One of the officers by the name of Payne-Fisher wrote a brief, poetic description of the church:

*To this sad Church my men I led
And lodged the living among the dead.
Without we keepe a guard within
The chancells made our magazine.
Soe that our Church thus armed may vaunt
She's truly now militant.*

Despite its ruined state, the church continued to play a role in the religious life of the local Catholic community. Mass was often celebrated within the roofless walls of the ancient Church. Close by the Bullaun Stone is a tree on which pilgrims, having prayed or made a wish, would hang a piece of cloth or other memento. Moreover Catholic burials continued there until the 1930s and gravestones are still extant. During the 1798 Rebellion, many women and children were forced to take shelter on the island. The feast day of St. Thaddeus falls on the September 7 and an annual pilgrimage to the island in honor of the Saint still takes place on the first Sunday in September.

In the 1700s the eccentric Earl of Bristol, Bishop of Derry (also known as Bishop Hervey), constructed a mansion in Ballyscullion on the County Derry side of Lough Beg. To improve his view of Church Island and Lough Beg, in 1788 he commissioned builder Michael Keenan to add a spire to the church ruins. This spire, known locally as Hervey's Folly, still stands and has become an iconic part of the Lough Beg landscape. During World War II an American aircraft based at the nearby Creagh air-base put a pronounced kink in the steeple when it hit it with its wing tip. It has since been partially straightened by the Department of the Environment.

The walls of the roofless medieval church still stand though they are in need of conservation. The building is oriented east/west and measures 52ft by 21ft with a door on the south side and windows at both ends and at the sides. The walls, built from local stone, are about 3ft thick. The church lies in the middle of a graveyard with about fifty known graves and a number of gravestones on

both the north and south sides of the church (the gravestone inscriptions have been recorded). The graves include that of Michael Keenan, the builder of the steeple.

Church Island consists of seven acres of land much of which is wooded. While it was an island in the old days, the dredging of the River Bann in the 1940s created a marshy wetland between the island and the west or County Derry side of Lough Beg. This low lying wetland can be crossed by foot except when a swollen River Bann floods the marsh and water completely surrounds the island. The wetlands, known locally as The Strand, cover over 300 acres (the second largest wetlands in the United Kingdom) and have become a haven for all kinds of birds, both resident and migratory. In 1965 they were designated part of the Lough Beg National Nature Reserve and an Area of Special Scientific Interest for their diversity of plant and animal life.

Church Island always held a fascination for me. I often asked my father if he would hike to it with me but, somehow, that never happened. In the intervening years Seamus Heaney's poem by that name reminded me of that unfulfilled ambition. And so it was, some 53 years after I left Ireland, that I found myself with a couple of days to spare during a brief visit to Magherafelt. My friend Eugene Kielt, lent me a pair of waders (essential equipment for this hike) and I set off one morning determined to finally make it to Church Island.

Trailhead

The easiest way to get there from Toomebridge or Belfast is to leave Toome going west on the A6 and to turn right (at 54°45.882'N, 6°30.127'W) onto the B182 about 1.5 miles beyond Toome. Driving north on the B152 toward Bellaghy for about 2 miles you encounter a small side road, the Ballydermot Road (at 54°47.513'N, 6°30.617'W) where you should turn right. After about 0.5 miles you will come to a sharp left-hand corner from which you can see Church Island and its spire in the distance. It is not easy to find a parking space here but tuck



Left: Nearing Church Island. Right: Inside the church.

in where you can. There is a stile over the bank (at 54°47.511'N, 6°30.019'W) that leads to the marsh and a sign describing the Lough Beg Nature Reserve. This is the starting point for the hike to Church Island.

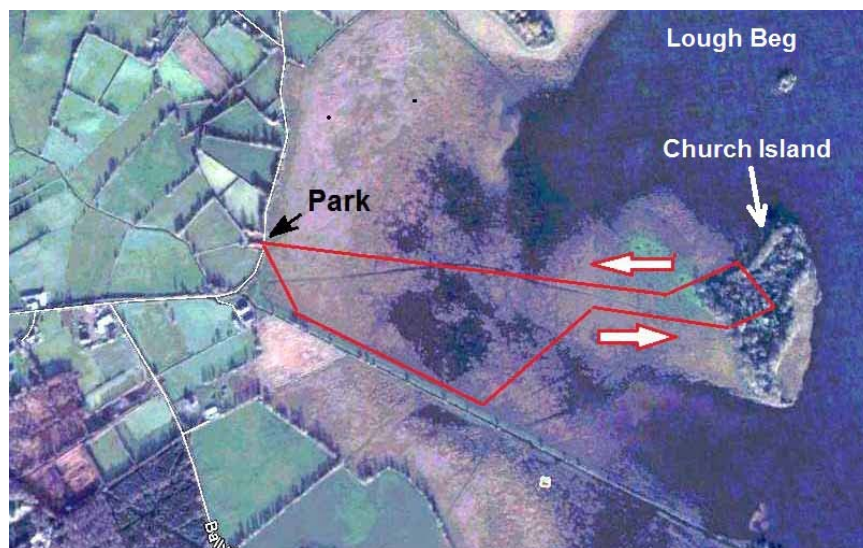
Hike

Before setting out take a careful look around the Strand. A local farmer by the name of Arrell sometimes grazes his bull there. If in doubt about the bull, carry a stout stick (Eugene also lent me one of these). Absent the bull, it is still not easy to tell the best way across the marsh though the Google map view provides some clues. There is a dredged dike that runs from the nearby farmhouse on your right out in a direction to the right of Church Island. The footing along the raised bank of this dike is good but the problem is you must, at some point, leave the dike (at about 54°47.350'N, 6°29.647'W) to strike out across the marsh. The footing then rapidly deteriorates (the elevation of the marsh is less than 40ft above sea level). With each footstep you will sink about six inches into the water and mud making progress slow and strenuous. One tip is to step on the clumps of reeds rather than try to avoid them. Eventually, as you near the island the footing gets better. On the return journey I took a different route striking out directly from the island toward the stile. Though still strenuous this proved a much better route. The hike across the Strand took about 30 minutes each way.

The slightly higher ground of the wooded island (highest elevation about 54ft) is surrounded by a barbed-wire fence but, if you head for the church steeple, there is an opening in the fence and a use-path through the woods and underbrush to the churchyard. A stile allows you to climb over the wall surrounding the graveyard and church (at 54°47.394'N, 6°29.084'W) and worn paths allow you to access the church and gravestones. It is indeed a quiet and mystical place, shrouded in centuries of strife and tragedy. If stones could talk they would tell a myriad of stories, a miniature version of Irish history.

I thought of all the places I have been since the days of that first adventure on the Moyola. Now that my knees are finally failing me, it is possible that Church Island will be my last adventure. If so, I am satisfied for I have been privileged to enjoy some of the most beautiful places on earth while there was still some solitude to enhance them. I am also deeply grateful for the marvelous friends who have ventured with me for they lent the adventures a joy beyond measure.

As for Church Island, I hope that someday, this site will receive the attention it deserves from the conservationists. This will need to include some alternative way for visitors to get to the island. But this place is so rich in history, such an important part of the local heritage that it deserves much more attention than it has received to date. I know that if such a place was located in my adopted country, it would be regarded as a national treasure and would have been protected and maintained with far greater care than it has been given so far.



Map of Church Island hike

1.6 Rathlin

- Hiking time: 3 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 4 miles
- Elevation gain: 70 feet
- Topo Map: Sheet 5 (Ballycastle), Discoverer Series, Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland
- Difficulties: Steep, exposed climb
- Permit: None

Characteristics

Rathlin island off the north coast of Ireland is a storied place of myths, massacres and abundant wildlife. Its isolation of old, maintained by the fierce north Atlantic, has been extended into modern times by an episodic and uncertain ferry service and this isolation has preserved this quiet and lovely place for the enjoyment of today's occasional visitors.

Perhaps the most widely known legend of Rathlin concerns the Scottish king Robert I, known as Robert the Bruce. During his early struggles to establish dominion over Scotland, Robert suffered a number of serious setbacks. Fleeing from a defeat at the Battle of Strath-Fillan in 1306, Robert took refuge in a cave on the island of Rathlin. There he was bemoaning his fate when he began to watch a spider struggling to build its web within the cave. Many times the spider failed, but each time it began again and, in the end, succeeded in creating the web. Inspired by the spider's example, Bruce emerged from the cave and, reviving his campaign, went on to win a famous victory at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. Crowned Robert I, he had a long and successful reign



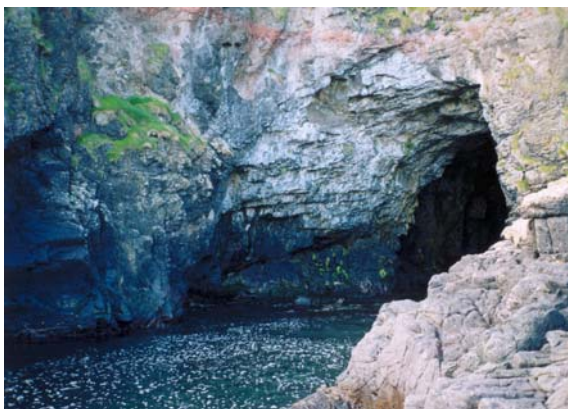
Left: Church Bay harbor. Right: Route to Bruce's Cave.

as King of Scotland. But he will forever be known to the world (and in countless children's books) as a classic example of persistence.

Though much doubt surrounds the historical accuracy of the legend and its location, the Rathlin people point to a sea-cave on the rugged northeast headland of the island and identify this as "Bruce's Cave". I learned that it was at the bottom of a sheer 200ft cliff and just south of the East Lighthouse that guards this storm-tossed corner of the North Atlantic. Atop the cliff not far away are the remains of a castle that was built in the 12th century and occupied by Robert the Bruce during his travail. Today's guidebooks claim the cave is only accessible by boat and only during calm seas, a rarity around Rathlin. This story recounts my expedition to seek out and visit Bruce's Cave.

The ferry was much larger than I expected. A landing craft type vessel, it had lowered its gangway onto the slope of the launching ramp in Ballycastle harbor and was ready to accept as many as half a dozen vehicles. But there were no vehicles this morning. Only about a dozen people had bought tickets in the harbor office and had wandered on board the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry (<http://www.calmac.co.uk/>) for the 10.30am trip across to Rathlin island. As we waited to depart a seal played among the harbor rocks and a shearwater stood watch on the harbor wall.

The 6mi trip from Ballycastle to Church Bay on Rathlin Island takes a little over 30min. The currents in this channel can be quite fierce; they create visible patches of turbulence that the ferry seeks to avoid. However, the L-shape of the island means that Church Bay, within the L, is sheltered from both the ocean and the wind. The currents and frequent storms have resulted in many wrecks around the coast of Rathlin and make this a popular diving venue. One prominent wreck within Church Bay is that of the warship HMS Drake that was torpedoed here by a German U-boat in 1916. It is now populated by large conger eels. Other sea life greets the visitor in Church Bay harbor, home to a large population of seals who bask on the rocks next to the tourists.



Left: Bruce's Cave. Right: Bruce's Castle.

The sun was shining as I disembarked in Church Bay at 55°17.56'N, 6°11.62'W and turned left away from the village. I stopped briefly at the lovely Church of St. Thomas, built in 1722, and maintained today with exquisite simplicity and elegance. Just past the church the road turned inland, climbing steeply toward the flat plateau on top of the island. Continuing on through a four-way junction at the Roman Catholic Church, the road turns east and, within 0.5mi, becomes a gravel-surfaced driveway that leads to the East Lighthouse on Altacarry Head. Here the plateau is exposed to the elements and the grassy slopes that characterized the land further southwest are now replaced by heather-covered heath land. The East Lighthouse itself, built in the 1850s, sits atop 200ft cliffs that plunge vertically down into the sea. It is famous as the site of Marconi's first radio transmission made between here and Ballycastle in 1898. The lighthouse and associated buildings are contained within a walled compound to which access is forbidden but that is not a problem for the hiker exploring the cliffs to either side of the headland.

After a brief visit to the coast north of the lighthouse, I made my way along the southern wall of the compound and began a detailed inspection of the cliffs that drop straight down into the ocean at that point. My purpose was to locate Bruce's Cave from the cliff top and, if possible, to find a way to climb down to it. The slippery grass that grows everywhere made it quite difficult to safely get a view over the edge of the cliff but by venturing onto several promontories and looking backwards I came to the conclusion that there were no accessible caves directly beneath the lighthouse. I then continued my precarious survey working my way southwards along the cliff's edge. About 100yds from the lighthouse at about 55°18.04'N, 6°10.17'W, I came to a slight break in the cliff where a steep, grass-covered gully descended to a rocky ledge far below. I could see that there were substantial sea inlets to either side of my cliff top vantage point. The inlet to the right or south of the gully seemed very promising and the only likely location of Bruce's Cave that I had found so far. Trouble was that the steep grassy route down to the ledge veered right across the top of a vertical drop into the left inlet. But I planned out the footholds and hand holds in detail and, leaving my pack at the top, began the downclimb. In the end, I descended to the ledge with little difficulty though the route might be much harder on a wet day. Reaching the broad ledge, I looked right and there it was - a beautiful and deep sea-cave, Bruce's Cave. A deep and navigable channel ran into the cave and culminated in a rocky beach about 20yds inside the cavern. I was able to tight rope along ledges on the right all the way to the cave entrance. I could have readily reached the beach by wading but chose to stay dry for the island had much that I had yet to see. It was clear that the cavern extended some distance inland but I could not discern quite how far that was.

I returned to the sunny ledge and sat down to enjoy this remote place and my success in reaching the cave. It had turned out to be a beautiful day, sunny and calm. I thought about Bruce, the spider and my own resolve. Sometimes I seem to set my mind on objectives that only I think have value; and I do admit to a single-minded tenaciousness in pursuing those goals. But, at the very least, these whims bring me to places of undeniable beauty and to experiences that

are deeply gratifying. Maybe, above all, these whims have opened windows into myself.

But time was awasting and there was much yet to see on this lovely island. I gathered myself for the climb back to the cliff-top, an ascent that was, as always, much easier than the descent. Continuing southward, I soon spotted the little remains of Bruce's castle on a small plot of land almost completely cut off from the cliff top heath land ($55^{\circ}17.93'N$, $6^{\circ}10.13'W$). The remains consisted of two small sections of wall at the edge of the cliff-ringed sea stack. A narrow land bridge allowed access to the castle from the mainland and I made the crossing to pay homage to Bruce. I also thought of the hundreds of native Irish that sought refuge here in 1575 and were massacred by the English army of the Earl of Essex.

From the castle, I hiked across country following a faint path in a western direction. This linked up with the end of a dirt road that took me back to the southern asphalt road leading back to the village. The excursion to Bruce's world had taken just 2hrs. During lunch at the village pub, I learned of a bus tour that would take me to the sea bird sanctuary at the other, western end of the island nearly four miles distant. The tour had been scheduled to depart about an hour ago but had been delayed because both batteries aboard the bus were dead. The owner operator was around the corner slowly recharging the batteries. There was a depressing prediction that it would take at least another hour to complete this task. I decided to start walking knowing that I could flag down the bus if and when it caught up with me but also knowing that there was insufficient time to hike to the west end and back. In the event, the bus did catch up with me after about a mile and I enjoyed a delightfully rustic bus tour of the west and southern ends of the island before returning to the village in time for the 3.30pm ferry back to the mainland. Highlights of the bus tour included the precipitous sea bird sanctuary at the dramatic western headland and the two ruined buildings next to each other at the southern tip. One belonged to the smugglers and the other to the coast guard whose primary task was the prevention of smuggling. Only in Ireland.



Map of Rathlin Island hike

1.7 Skellig Michael

- Trip time: 4.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 1 mile
- Elevation gain: 800 feet
- Topo Map: Attached map
- Permit: None required

Characteristics

Around the world there are a few special structures that represent the pinnacle of human endeavor and achievement. Some, like the Taj Mahal, are unique for their elegance. Some, like the Great Pyramids, the Great Wall or Stonehenge, are wondrous for their engineering. Others, like Macchu Picchu, were constructed in spectacular natural settings. And then there are a few that cause us to truly marvel at the limits of the human spirit. This story is about one such place.

Out in the raw north Atlantic, an eight mile voyage from the rugged southwest coast of Ireland, there is a precipitous pinnacle of rock that rises some 700ft above the waves. This sea-girthed mountain top, storm-shredded and wave-smashed, surrounded on all sides by dark cliffs rising sheer out of the ocean, is known as Skellig Michael. The apex of this island consists of two peaks: the lower, 607ft peak is rounded and has some grass-covered spaces. The higher 715ft South Peak is an almost vertical crag with a sharp rock summit. In between the peaks is a feature known as Christ's Saddle (elevation 400ft). Needless to say the area available for human exploitation is very small and very high above the ocean. One would expect that the rock could only be home to a few fearless sea birds. And yet sometime in the sixth century, when the rest of Europe was deep in the Dark Ages, a small group of ascetic monks sailed from the Irish mainland in fragile currachs (boats made of animal skins



Left: Approaching Skellig Michael. Right: On the lighthouse road.

and tar) and made perilous land fall on Skellig Michael. Some believe they were fleeing from the rampaging savagery of their fellow men. Others think they were seeking the ultimate austerity, believing that brought them closer to God.

Whatever drove them they were determined to make permanent settlement in this fierce place. They managed to climb the cliffs to the saddle and thence to the flat spaces on the lower summit. There, over the decades, they constructed a tiny monastery from the only material available, namely the rock itself. Due to their stone construction and their isolation, the remains of this monastery are remarkably well preserved and consist of six small beehive cells, round on the outside and rectangular within. Two places of worship were also built; one was later improved and dedicated to St. Michael so that, thereafter, the islet became known as Skellig Michael.

The monastery managed to survive for some four centuries, living on rain-water, sea birds, fish and the little oats and vegetables they could grow on the tiny plots of cleared land. They also needed supplies from the mainland. But, even here in this remote place, they were not able to completely escape the marauders; the Vikings sacked the monastery in the ninth century and a number of times thereafter. Perhaps that is why the monks built a tiny retreat atop the highest place on the island, the 715ft South Peak. The climbing route to this precarious perch is daunting and much more easily defended than the monastery on the lower summit. Indeed, there is one spot along the route known as the Needle's Eye where a single man could defend against an army. Of course, it is also possible that this aerie was developed as the ultimate in devotional austerity.

Trailhead

On Aug. 22, 2004, Doreen and I disembarked from the lobster boat at a small jetty in Blind Man's Cove, one of the few sheltered places anywhere around Skellig Michael. Over the internet (ken@skelligtrips.com) we had booked passage for this date with Ken Roddy but had allowed ourselves several subsequent



Left: South Peak, Skellig Michael. Right: South Peak Trail.

days in case the weather cancelled the trip as it frequently does. As soon as we landed at Cork Airport on the evening of Aug.21, I called Ken who informed me that the forecast for the next day looked good; it might, indeed, be the best day for the coming week and maybe the only one. This accelerated our schedule and we left Cork at 6.00am the next morning to drive to Portmagee at the far end of the Iveragh Peninsula on the Ring of Kerry. Ken was waiting at the pier and, with about 10 other intrepid tourists, we soon boarded his lobster boat for the ocean crossing.

We left Portmagee ($51^{\circ}53.15'N$, $10^{\circ}21.98'W$) about 10.30am and were soon pitching up and down in the Atlantic as we emerged from the Portmagee Channel and the shelter of Bray Head. The Skellig rocks were now clearly visible but still eight miles of ocean away. The sea life immediately signaled that we had left the dominion of man for sea birds flew by in elegant formation and dolphins raced to play alongside our boat, leaping in the air just feet away as if to inspect this latest group of adventurers. Over the next hour the Great Skellig loomed ever larger ahead of us. In the lee shadow of this spectacular rock we could see one of the rock staircases that seemed to climb straight up the cliffs to the soaring summit. And soon we entered the tiny inlet, Blind Man's Cove ($51^{\circ}46.36'N$, $10^{\circ}32.20'W$), where a natural landing place has been supplemented by a small concrete pier. The boat rose and fell so that good timing was needed to safely step from the boat onto the pier. It was all done rapidly and soon the boat moved out and away from the dangerous rocks to wait in the open ocean while we explored the island.

Hike

When the lighthouses were built in the 1820s a narrow road was blasted out of the cliff to allow access from Blind Man's Cove to the lighthouses at the far end



Left: Oratory Terrace, South Peak. Right: Stairs from Christ's Saddle.

of the island. Following this easy path, we contoured around high above Cross Cove and passed the steel helicopter landing pad built in mid-air overhanging the sea. About 400yds from the boat we came to the point where the lighthouse road intersects one of the monk's stairways (at $51^{\circ}46.20'N$, $10^{\circ}32.34'W$), the South Trail that zigzags 500ft up from the South Landing to Christ's Saddle. The monks built several other stairways, one directly up from Blind Man's Cove to the monastery and another from the Blue Cove on the north side up to Christ's Saddle but neither of these are practical or safe for today's tourists.

Just a short distance up the stairway from the lighthouse road is the Wailing Woman, a projecting rock formation of odd and haunting form. In times gone by, she was one of the penitential stations of the cross on the way to the heights above. To the secular visitor today, she seems to stand guard, testifying to this special place of myths and spirits and reminding the visitor that their stay is brief and insubstantial. Beyond this guardian, the stairway steepens and the view down to the ocean becomes increasingly intimidating. Eventually, the stairway edges into Christ's Saddle at $51^{\circ}46.24'N$, $10^{\circ}32.41'W$, 400ft above the waves. Here, Doreen and I paused to rest in the reassuring but tiny area of flat ground with great cliffs above and below.

Here, too, Doreen was kind enough to wait, kind enough to indulge me while I fulfilled my ambition to leave the normal tourist trail and climb the daunting, 715ft South Peak. Several centuries ago the South Peak became the destination of pilgrims determined to visit the stations of the cross all the way to the summit of this awe-inspiring peak. There they would edge their way along an overhanging rock known as "The Spit" to kiss a standing stone perched on the end. That stone fell into the ocean some years ago but the magnetic pull of the South Peak has not been reduced as a result. Apart from the spectacular views and the excitement of the climb, there are the remains of the tiny hermitage built on a ledge high up on the South Peak perhaps a thousand years ago. It is even more awesome than the view.



Monastery.

A left fork at Christ's Saddle took me up to a narrow ridge that connects the South Peak with an outcrop of rocks to the southwest. From there one accesses an improved ledge that contours around to the western side of the peak. Here I found that ropes had been strung along the ledge as a safety railing though they were not essential. The ledge trail ends about 15ft below a large perched boulder separated from the mountain by a narrow defile called the Needle's Eye. Scrambling up the rock face below this feature, I had little difficulty in climbing up through the Needle's Eye. Indeed there are convenient footholds that may have been cut into the rock centuries ago. One surmises that the Needle's Eye may have allowed the South Peak to serve as a safe refuge since a few men could guard the Eye against a host of raiders.

Emerging from the top of the Needle's Eye, one is rewarded with an awesome view. Just below on a rock outcropping is an ancient enclosure whose purpose is difficult to imagine; far below that are the ruins of a more modern structure, the remains of the second, upper lighthouse now long abandoned. Turning around to face the peak, one recognizes a steep but easy climb up a slight gully with many good footholds. Forty feet up you emerge onto the end of a flat ledge known as the Garden Terrace. This ledge seems natural but it is in fact of human construction being supported underneath by hidden, man-made retaining walls; it may or may not have served as a hermit's garden. The ascent resumes back at the northwestern end of the Garden Terrace where you continue to climb up the rock face for about 20ft to a comfortable path. In the southeastern direction this path leads down to the most important archaeological site on the South Peak, namely the Oratory Terrace. Here one finds, among other relics, the remains of a small oratory built by the monks. Clearly this was intended as much more than a station for short visits, because an intricate system of water collection has been chipped out of the rock face and terminates in two interconnected water basins. It is an awesome place with an incredible view and causes one to marvel at the human spirit.

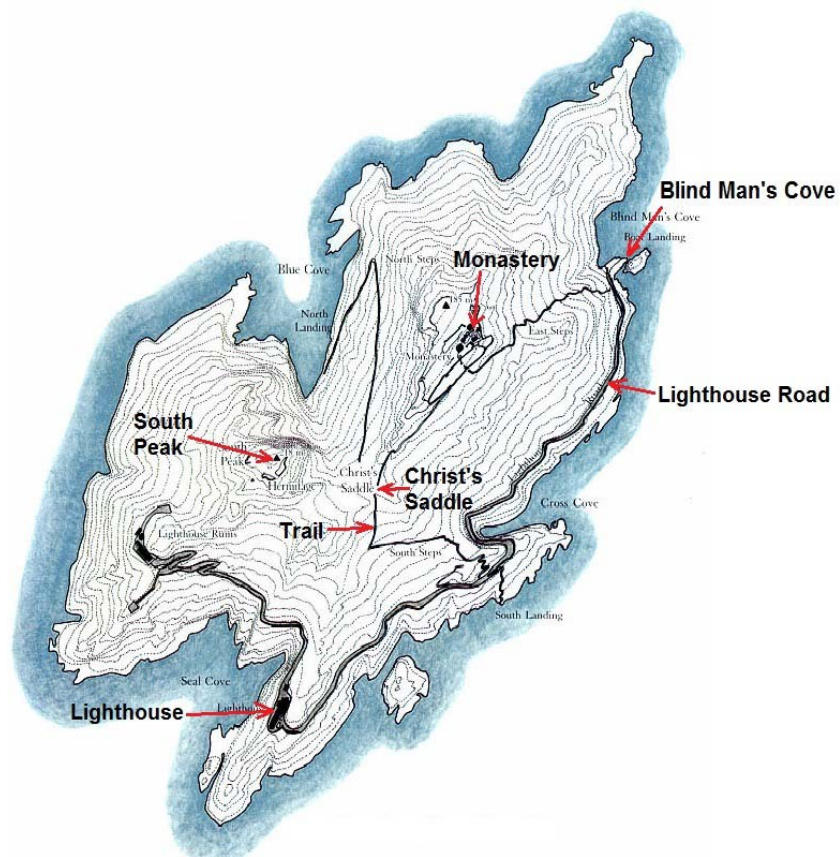
The summit of the South Peak is only about 45ft above the Oratory Terrace. To reach there you retrace your steps up the ledge leading to the Terrace and past where you ascended from below. The ledge leads into a corner where, with the aid of good foot and hand holds, you can climb last 15ft to the summit. The peak itself is adorned with a modern iron weather vane but the eye is soon drawn to the incredible spectacle in every direction. Almost directly below you on the east is Christ's Saddle and to the northeast you see, for the first time, the lower rounded peak and the tops of the beehive cells that constitute the monastery. On the north and west the cliffs drop straight down to the ocean waves, while the upper and lower lighthouses are visible to the southwest and south. It is a special place to have the privilege to visit and one can readily understand how it became a place of pilgrimage.

Reluctantly I dragged myself away from the summit and quickly descended to Christ's Saddle where I rejoined Doreen. From there we climbed the last steep stairway that leads to a ledge trail with an enormous 600ft of exposure down to the ocean waves. Traversing this ledge trail, brought us to the doorway through the first curtain wall just below the monastery. The curtain wall encloses a

courtyard that overlooks other clearings and small structures right at the edge of the cliff. We spent a few moments here getting our breath and admiring the marvelous sea vista before us. Little Skellig dominated the seascape and the tens of thousands of sea birds that roost on that island made it appear like a great white bee's nest. The rugged southwest coast of County Kerry completed the backdrop that, on this day was blessed by a blue sky background.

A massive dry stone wall protects the monastery on this southeastern side and access to the inner courtyard is by way of a tunnel doorway through this great wall. Climbing up the steps at the other side one is greeted by the line of six beehive structures with their corbeled stone roofs (at $51^{\circ}46.32'N$, $10^{\circ}32.33'W$). These beehive structures have a square plan form inside and a circular one outside. A set of projecting roof rocks allowed the monks to climb to the top of the structure and open or close a rock that covered the top of chimney. Only one roof is missing and it may well have been dismantled by the monks themselves. Between the line of beehive huts and the great wall the courtyard is filled by one in tact oratory, the ruins of a more modern church, the Church of Saint Michael, and a tiny graveyard with gravestones and a large Celtic cross. The older intact oratory is similar in structure to the beehive cells except that it has a rectangular plan form both inside and out. A window and a doorway of the Church of St. Michael still stand though much of the rest is gone. One lighthouse keeper buried two of his infant sons in the church and covered their graves with an inscribed gravestone. But this is the only modern incursion that has been allowed to remain. It is indeed a wondrous place, a treasure preserved by isolation. Doreen and I ate our lunch and listened as one of the docents told us what little is known of those remarkable dark age inhabitants.

Too soon, however, it was time to take our leave, to struggle down 600ft of ancient stairway back down to sea level. Descending was in some ways more of a challenge than ascending for looking down at the sea so very far below us was seriously intimidating. However, we made it slowly but surely. We had been told to meet the lobster boat back at the jetty at 2.00pm after 2.5hrs on the rock; everyone was there on time and quickly boarded the boat for the return to the mainland. As the boat drew away from the island, we looked back in admiration at the imperfect refuge of those ancient hermits, marveling at the unquenchable spirit they needed to survive in this awesome place.



Map of Skellig Michael

1.8 Tory Island

- Hiking time: 2.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3 miles
- Elevation gain: 250 feet
- Topo Map: Sheet 1 (North Donegal), 1:126720 Series, Ordnance Survey of Ireland
- Permit: None

Characteristics

There is nowhere quite like Tory Island, a bleak and treeless landscape much of which has been scraped down to the bare rock to provide soil for the fields and turf for the fireplaces. It is a place out of time, a hundred years or more, and it struggles to survive the present. Exposed to the fierce Atlantic off the northwest corner of Ireland, sea travel over the nine miles to the mainland is dangerous in the best of weather and lethal the rest of the year. Many of the tiny houses are now empty, abandoned by families fleeing to a better life. At one time the island population exceeded 500; today it is less than 100. No wonder that those that remain are a fierce, tough and independent people. They choose their own “King of Tory” to help represent their needs and aspirations (other islands of Ireland used to do the same but elsewhere the practice has disappeared). For the past 20 years, Patsy Dan Rodgers has been the “King of Tory” and an active and vigorous representative for the Island people. He greets every tourist as they step off the ferry, lobbies for the needs of the islanders and has initiated and promoted a school of island painting that exhibits and sells its art work around the world. I had the great privilege of spending a couple of evenings with him in the local bar that is part of the Harbour View Hotel and much enjoyed not only his company but the music of his accordion.



Left: Patsy Dan Rodgers, the “King” of Tory. Right: West Village on Tory.

This remote corner is one of the small Irish-speaking regions of Ireland, part of what is known as the “Gaeltacht”. But the island is yet another step removed even from that community. Several years ago an outsider purchased a small holiday cottage on the island. He then left on an extended business trip abroad. Upon his return to Tory he found that his cottage had completely disappeared, its location now occupied by a parking lot for the local bar. The police (from the mainland) were never able to find anyone on the island who knew what had happened though many seemed to enjoy the improved access to the pub.

Other than its kind and welcoming people, the island’s greatest asset is its natural beauty. The bird life is profuse and numerous; corncrakes, peregrine falcons, choughs and ravens flourish on the land while the gulls, kittiwakes, puffins, petrels and shearwaters populate the cliffs and seashores. But perhaps the most striking natural feature are the spectacular sea cliffs along the northern coast and especially around the east end of the island. It is awe inspiring to walk along the northern cliff-top and to watch the huge Atlantic waves crash off the base of the cliffs. But the true highlight is the spectacular east end of the island known as the Dun Bhalior Peninsula. In September 2013 I made my way to the island to see this special place.

The ferry to Tory Island leaves from several mainland ports but the most convenient of these is Magheroarty (Machaire Rabhartaigh) in northwestern County Donegal. To reach this small port you drive to the village of Gortahork (Gort a Choirce) in the extreme northwest corner of Donegal. Most visitors will approach Gortahork from Letterkenny via Dunfanaghy and Falcarragh (An Fal Carrach). From Gortahork you follow the narrow coast road westwards for two miles to the coastal hamlet of Magheroarty. Note that in the Gaeltacht, many of the road signs are exclusively in Irish so it pays to memorize the Irish versions of the town names. In Magheroarty you turn left down a narrow lane leading to a pier that is readily visible from the coast road. The ferry ticket office and a small cafe are located at the base of the pier. Though the schedule changes with the season, at the time of writing the ferry for Tory leaves at 11.30am, 13.30pm and 17.00pm and returns leaving Tory at 10.30am, 12.30pm



Left: North coast. Right: Wishing Rock.

and 16.00pm. The journey takes about 40 minutes. The boat is a rugged sea-going vessel for the crossing can be very rough. On the island the ferry docks at Camusmore Harbour in the main village of An Baile Thiar (West Village) at 55°15.92'N, 8°13.57'W. The one hotel (and bar) on the island, the Harbour View Hotel, is located at the head of the pier; note that it may only be open in the summer. The rooms are basic (no TV, no phone) but clean and the breakfast and bar food are good.

A single track asphalt road runs the east-west length of the island, a distance of about 3 miles. It ends at the lighthouse on the west end and at a small harbor on the east end. In addition, there may be a total of about a mile of single track dirt road. Though I did not make an accurate count there seemed to be at least 100 cars on the island, about one vehicle for every 100yds of road. That must be one of the highest vehicle densities in the world. And I didn't even count the bicycle-powered cement mixer!!! Midway along this road is the main village of An Baile Thiar (West Village) where the ferry docks. About a mile east is the smaller village of An Baile Thior (East Village). As with most of the villages in the Gaeltacht there are few people to be seen.

Hike

I set out one morning from the hotel in An Baile Thiar to explore the eastern end of the island and its dramatic sea-cliff scenery. At the end of the village I passed the little local church surrounded by gravestones inscribed in Irish and then paused at the tiny museum where some of the island paintings are stored. A small plaque dedicates the museum to "Lord Hugh Douglas-Hamilton" though why the islanders would acknowledge the British aristocracy seems to me strange indeed. A little further on, midway between An Baile Thiar and the smaller village of An Baile Thior (East Village), a World War II torpedo stands by the side of the road having been recovered from the sea, defused and erected there by the islanders. As I mused irreverently about Lord Hugh and the torpedo, I could not help but reflect in more serious vein on the psychology of the downtrodden. On how unfairly the history and associated legends are written by the conquerors. The local mythic king Balor is remembered as evil, reputedly the perpetrator of many ruthless deeds while the English butchers who committed very real atrocities on the island on a number of occasions are barely remembered. Instead there is a memorial plaque to the worthless "Lord Hugh". Where are the remembrances of the leaders who helped the island survive? I vote for a reconstructed Balor who built the spectacular fort on the west end where his people could find safe refuge. And today I vote for Patsy Dan who has done so much to cause the island to be remembered and to allow the community to survive.

As I came to the outskirts of An Baile Thior, I forked left at 55°15.64'N, 8°12.72'W and continued on the road through the silent village. I could not help but wonder how many eyes watched my progress through the quiet drizzle. Perhaps that silence is the only way to survive in a land beleaguered by the conqueror and the climate. Leaving the village, the road dips down and ap-

proaches the east end of the island. There, about 20min from the start, I forked left onto a dirt road (the asphalt turns right for another hundred yards or so). A sign here describes the Black Choughs (black crow-like birds with red beaks) that inhabit this area. About 100yds along the dirt road takes you to a low saddle (55°15.42'N, 8°11.69'W) narrowly separating a large inlet on the north coast called Port Challa from a bay on the south coast called Port an Duin. The road ends here but a well-worn use-trail proceeds down to the saddle and up the other side (winches at the saddle are used to transport boats between the north and south sides of the island). This narrow land-bridge leads to the large multi-pronged peninsula at the east end of Tory Island known as the Dun Bhalior Peninsula (The Peninsula of Balor's Fort), the spectacular highlight of the island, scenically and archaeologically. It is the site of an almost impregnable Early Iron Age Fort, the home of the legendary King Balor of the Evil Eye who features in many of the myths and legends of the northwest.

After the very short climb up from the Port Challa/Port an Duin saddle you access the surprisingly flat top of the peninsula. The small section of this flat-top to the south or right was the former site of a small, square fortification known as Tory Castle. Probably built in the 15th century (though coins of both the 14th and 17th century have been found nearby), this castle existed at the time of the 1608 massacre of the island population by an English army. By the 19th century only the foundations remained and nothing can be seen today (Patsy Dan is anxious to have an archaeologist excavate this site).

Turning northwards I began a clockwise tour of the peninsula. Awesome views emerged as I ascended northwards across the bare mesa atop the cliffs that line the east side of Port Challa. This is a sloping natural ramp that gradually narrows as you ascend. It was the site of ancient fields serving the fort further north and, later, Tory Castle to the south. About 200yds up this narrowing ramp, the cliff edges on the two sides come within about 10yds of each other forming the only "gateway" to the high ground and fort beyond. Moreover, the ramp steepens here and the defenders of the fort above constructed a series of earth embankments whose outline are visible today. These defined the narrow



Left: An Eochair Mhor from fort. Right: An Eochair Mhor from the Anvil.

southern boundary of Dun Bhalior and the only access to the high ground beyond. Today a short climb over these earth embankments brings you to the area of rock-strewn ground dotted with rock cairns, the site of Dun Bhalior, or King Balor's fort at 55°15.62'N, 8°11.64'W. Surrounded on three sides by 300ft vertical sea cliffs, and accessible only by the narrow gateway guarded by the earth embankments, it is a virtually impregnable stronghold, probably first occupied in the Early Iron Age though it may have been first utilized in the Late Bronze Age. Legend has it that it was the stronghold of the mythical King Balor, king of a tribe known as the Fomorians. Many stories are told of this mythical figure, King Balor of the Evil Eye. According to the 12th century annals, Balor was slain and the Fomorians driven from the mainland by the powerful Irish tribe, the Tuatha de Danaan. There is much evidence of human occupation of the fort, particularly the outlines of small, semi-subterranean huts as well as several wells. But the site is so bleak and exposed to the raw Atlantic weather that it is hard to imagine that it was used for more than a refuge. Nevertheless it is a special place, historically, archaeologically and scenically and perhaps deserves more attention than it has been given.

The highest ground just beyond the rock cairns, narrows to a dramatic point with an awesome ocean view in all directions. Here the cliffs to the east and west drop vertically for 300ft into the roaring Atlantic Ocean. From this vantage point you can see the whole of Tory Island, the lighthouse at the west end and the main village of An Baile Thiar. No one could approach the island by sea without being visible from this point. A large balanced rock on the very tip of this apex is known as the Wishing Stone or Leac na Leannan, the lover's stone. A wish is granted to anyone foolish enough to step onto it and turn around three times or to throw three stones that end lying on top of it. The overhanging cliff beyond the Wishing Stone drops more than 90ft down to a narrow, terminal sea-stack.

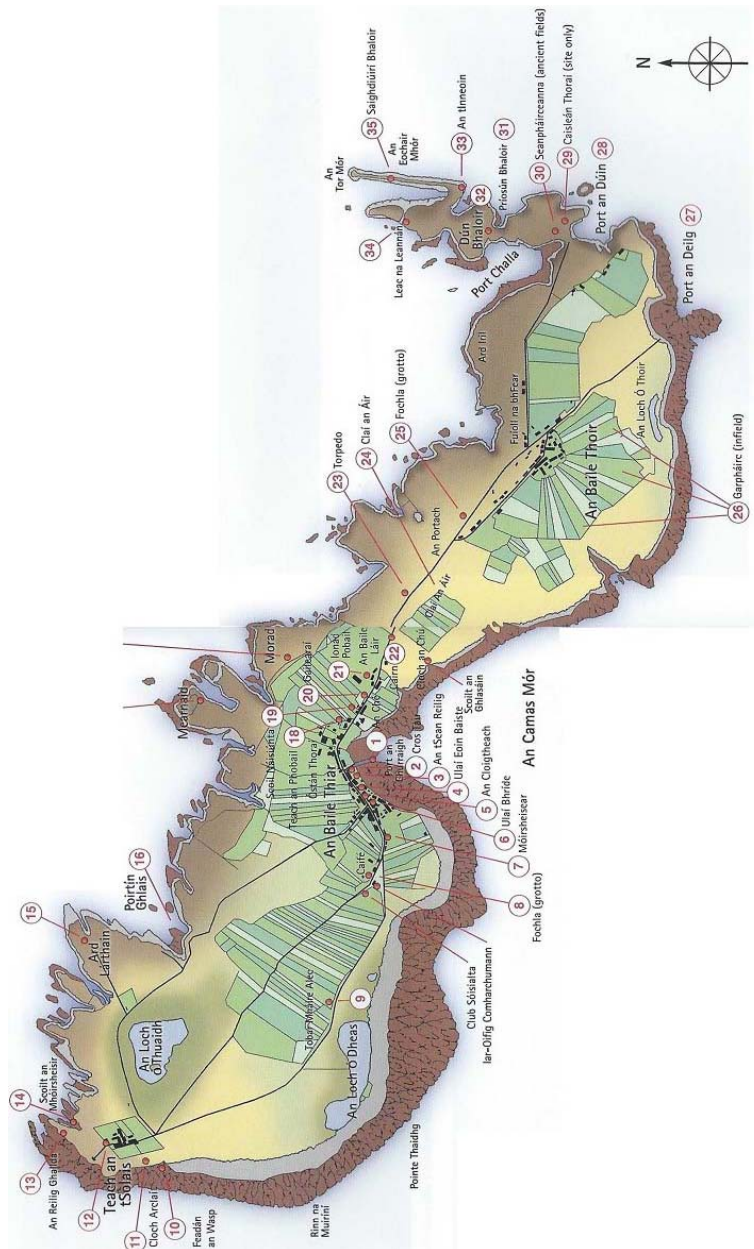
Continuing the clockwise tour around the flat-top, you turn right to view another awesome sight, An Eochair Mhor, the Big Key. This long and dramatic, cliff-sided linear spur juts out from the east side of the main promontory for several hundred yards, culminating in a crag called Tormore Summit (An Tor Mor, the Big Rock) topped by a visible cairn. This remarkable, knife-edged promontory slices out into the raw ocean with cliffs on all sides and a serrated, raw rock apex only a few feet wide. The south end of the Big Key is joined to the main part of the peninsula by a very narrow ridge that accesses a slightly broader grassy area known as An Tinneoin, the Anvil (a small, oblong enclosure on the Anvil may be the remains of a lookout). Just north of the Anvil, An Eochair Mhor is interrupted by several vertical rocky pinnacles known as Balor's Soldiers. These prevent further transit along An Eochair Mhor. Beyond this technical equipment and a strong constitution would be needed for further progress. At the north end the Big key ends in a crag called Tormore Summit (An Tor Mor, the Big Rock) at 55°15.85'N, 8°11.43'W at the top of a final 40ft vertical climb.

I did not proceed along An Eochair Mhor but stopped at the Anvil. Others have accepted the challenge to climb along the apex of the An Eochair Mhor to Tormore Summit. The first section seems easy for one can bypass the first of

Balor's soldiers on the steep grassy slope on the east side of the Key. Beyond this are a number of rock climbing challenges in order to circumvent peaks along the serrated ridge. These obstacles necessitate technical equipment and the traverse culminates in that 40ft vertical ascent to the Tormore Summit. A cairn on top of the summit indicates successful ascents (the main challenges appear to be the 200ft exposure and the inclement weather). Video of a technical climb of An Eochair Mhor can be found at <http://iain-miller.blogspot.com/2012/09/tory-island-rock-climbing-donegal.html>.

Resigned and pensive I returned along the narrow ridge from the Anvil, wishing that I had brought with me a rope and a fellow climber. Resolving to return, I continued my circumnavigation of the cliff-top by contouring south around the dramatic, cliff-ringed bay between the Anvil and the main peninsula, a bay that is known as Balor's Prison. Passing through King Balor's fort once again one encounters a small well and circular depressions about 15ft across that are the remnants of huts. Further around the bay, you can look back north to see the sea-tunnel under the Anvil that connects the channel between An Eochair Mhor and the main promontory with Prison Bay.

Back at the first saddle, I turned left and followed the cliff-edge path that led down to the small harbor in Port an Duin. Only a solitary lobster pot indicated any activity in that harbor. It took less than an hour to wander back along the low-lying south coast of the island and past the torpedo to the main village and the hotel. I had seen much to occupy my thoughts along the way. Most of all, I had experienced a majestic cliff-top refuge surrounded by awesome rock and a raging ocean. Only the fear of strange, dangerous men could have induced anyone to live in this fierce place, especially given the difficulty of prying a living from the meager soil and the cold, cold sea. It is hard to understand why the English would not leave these people alone, to live out their lives in this remote, hard-scrabble place. Sometimes history is very hard to understand and almost impossible to truly comprehend.



Map of Tory Island

Chapter 2

SCOTLAND AND WALES

This selection of adventures in Scotland and Wales begins with visits to two extraordinary Scottish island places and concludes with a sentimental ascent of Mount Snowdon in northwest Wales.



Adventures in Scotland and Wales

2.1 St. Kilda

- Hiking time: 3 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3 miles
- Elevation gain: 500 feet
- Topo Map: Attached map
- Permit: None

Characteristics

Out in the bleak North Atlantic, more than “forty miles from sweet bugger all” (viz. the Outer Hebrides of Scotland), there rises from the waves a tiny, cliff-ringed island whose dramatic scenery can only be matched by the remarkable and tragic story of its long-isolated people. That island was called Hirta by its residents though it is labeled on the map by the anglicized name, St. Kilda. Only a mile and a half across, this tiny island is nevertheless much larger than the nearby sea-stacks, some of which tower vertically over 1400 feet above the waves. No-one knows how and when the people got to this remote island in the first place though the archaeological evidence indicates that they were there before the birth of Christ. The language they spoke right up until the end was a strange, archaic form of Scotch/Irish Gaelic. The Vikings visited, of course, and left their mark as well as some DNA and the names of a few natural features. The island does appear on some ancient maps. But nothing was really documented until Donald Monro, the archdeacon of the western islands of Scotland, visited his islands in 1549 and penned a brief description of each, including a paragraph on Hirta. Monro wrote that the inhabitants were “simple creatures” and that their produce was “corn and girsing, namely for scheip”. He remarked that “... the seais are stark and verie evill entering in ony of the saids Iles.” But the first detailed account of the island and its people was written by a doctor by



Left: Village Bay on Hirta. Right: Main Street.

the name of Martin Martin who visited Hirta in 1695 and penned an extensive report entitled “A description of the western islands of Scotland circa 1695” (currently available in paperback from Birlinn Ltd. of Edinburgh).

Remarkably, the people of Hirta, no more than about 180 in number at any time, found a way to survive on this treeless, storm-swept speck of 1700 acres in the north Atlantic. They lived inside a protected, south-facing bay (location 57°48.797'N, 8°34.111'W) surrounded by mountains whose other sides are huge vertical cliffs dropping straight down to the waves. The bay is part of an ancient volcanic crater. Prior to about 1840, the homes they built consisted of a line of stacked-stone houses with peat/thatch roofs, ranged in a circular arc a short distance above the shoreline of the bay. In 1836-38 a kind benefactor provided the means to construct a row of small but roomier cottages along the same crescent that the islanders knew as Main Street. The empty remains of these cottages (some reconstructed for use by the National Trust) as well as a number of the cruder, earlier homes now line Main Street, a somber reminder of the tenuousness of the human experience. The place has the reverence of a graveyard (there is, in fact, a small burying ground in a stone-walled enclosure behind the row of houses) and one feels the same need to tread quietly out of respect for the community that lived and died here. Because of this the nearby military base seems like a gross and thoughtless intrusion. During its lifetime Main Street was the center of St. Kildan life; each morning the menfolk would gather there to decide on the community work to be done that day (some have described this meeting as the St. Kildan “Parliament”). There the birding expeditions to the cliffs and sea stacks would be planned; and there the final exodus was decided upon.

The St.Kildans were a brave and hardy people with their own culture that included a strong tradition of communal sharing combined with a necessary spirit of collective but calculated risk. That risk included the danger of living off the produce from the cliffs that surrounded them, cliffs that they learned to negotiate at a very young age. When he reached manhood and had found a prospective partner among the few available, a young St. Kildan man was required to prove his courage and his potential as a provider at the so-called



Left: Main Street. Right: Main Street Parliament (photo by G.W.Wilson).

“Mistress Stone”. This natural feature on the cliffs of the Ruaival peninsula south and west of the village consisted of a dramatic doorway in the rock at the cliff-top with a vertical 400ft drop to the ocean below. In the words of Martin Martin who was challenged to perform this traditional feat of bravado, “... upon the lintel of this door, every bachelor-wooer is by an ancient custom obliged in honor to give a specimen of his affection for the love of his mistress, and it is thus; he is to stand on his left foot, having the one half of his sole over the rock, and then he draws the right foot further out to the left, and in this posture bowing, he puts both his fists further out to the right foot; and then after he has performed this, he has acquired no small reputation, being always after it accounted worthy of the finest mistress in the world ...” No doubt this rite-of-passage steeled the young man for his duties gathering food on the cliffs of Hirta, Stac Lee and Stac-an-Armin.

A young St.Kildan might also be dared to traverse the dramatic sea-tunnel through the headland on the north side of Hirta. To get to this remarkable natural feature he would have to hike over the 700ft saddle above the village in order to drop into Gleann More, the other main valley on the island. Passing the House of the Amazon, he would have veered to the right in order to access the relatively flat top of the Gob na h-Airde peninsula on the north side of Glen Bay. Proceeding to the cliffs at the very end of this headland he would have noticed a steep path down to his left by which to reach a narrow ledge that leads down to the tunnel entrance and to a sloping rock shelf in the tunnel itself. He might even have been challenged to proceed through the tunnel though the raging seas that dominate the far eastern end may have made the exit impossible.

For sustenance the St.Kildans survived by ingenuity and daring. Though they were able with difficulty to grow some potatoes and a few vegetables, to husband a native breed of sheep and to catch a few fish, their primary nutrition came from the huge rookeries of sea birds that populated the island cliffs and nearby sea stacks. They not only gathered the eggs of the gannets and fulmars but also caught and ate the birds themselves. To do so they manufactured ropes and rappelled hundreds of feet down the cliffs of Hirta. Even more spectacularly, they made landing upon and climbed the sea stacks. Of their ropes Martin



*Left: Rappeling for birds at the Gap (from film by Paul Robello & Bobbie Mann)
Right: Birding haul (photo by G.W.Wilson).*

Martin wrote “ ... there are only three on the whole island, each 24 fathoms in length (about 144 ft). They are either knit together and lengthen by tying the one to the other, or used separately as occasion requires; the chief thing upon which the strength of these ropes depends, is cow hides salted, and cut out in one long piece, this they twist round the ordinary rope of hemp, that secures it from being cut by the rocks; they join sometimes at the lower end two ropes, one of which they tie about the middle of one climber, and another about the middle of another, that these may assist one another in case of a fall; but the misfortune is, that sometimes the one happens to pull down the other, and so both fall into the sea; but if they escape (as they do commonly of late) they get an incredible number of eggs and fowls.” They climbed barefoot and, in doing so since childhood, developed ankles and feet that were adapted for their tasks.

The St. Kildans used every part of the birds they caught. The birds to be eaten, whether gannets (solan geese), fulmars, puffins or other sea birds, were stored in the “cleits” that are sprinkled all over the landscape of Hirta. Cleits were small stone-walled sheds with turf roofs used for the storage of all of the St. Kildan’s goods. They had a single entrance on the uphill side and were well vented through the gaps in the stone walls to keep the stores as dry and cold as possible. The feathers of the birds were used for many purposes, in later years to pay tithes to the nominal landowners, the MacLeod of MacLeod. The oil from the fulmars was prized for its restorative powers and for lamp oil. Fulmars also formed the favorite diet of the St. Kildans though a puffin was regarded as a tasty snack. Shoes, though not regularly worn by the St. Kildans, were sometimes fabricated from the necks of gannets.

It is an easy hike up the valley northeast of the village to a saddle called “The Gap” where the land drops 535ft precipitously down into the sea. This was the most convenient birding location on Hirta and was therefore the site of the ropework demonstrations featured in some of the early film accessible using Youtube. However this birding location was much less productive than the group of sea stacks that are visible across the ocean some four miles northeast of the Gap. It is a truly awesome experience to approach these sea stacks by boat. The largest, Boreray (the “Fortified Isle”), is a giant wedge-shaped projection,



Left: Stac Lee and Boreray. Right: Stac Lee.

vertical on three sides and very steep (but grass covered) on the fourth; almost a mile long and half a mile wide, it rises to a ridge top that towers 1243ft above the ocean, as high as the top of the mast on the Empire State building. Yet the St. Kildans would row their wooden longboat over from Hirta on birding expeditions and land on Boreray. During their visits to Boreray over the years they built a “bothy” or shelter for overnight stays as well as a number of cleits in which to temporarily store their harvest of birds. Even more dramatic are the several vertical columns of bare rock separated from Boreray by just a few hundred yards of often-raging ocean. Stac Lee (the “Grey Stack”) is perhaps the most impressive; with a sea-level footprint of just 200yds by 100yds. It rises some 545ft to an awesome summit plastered white by gannets, their nests, their eggs and their guano. Stac-an-Armin (the “Warrior’s Stack”) is slightly larger, rising to a height of 627ft. As you ride the waves around these awesome rocks, it is almost impossible to visualize how the St.Kildans managed to land on these cliffs from their frail longboats. Yet they not only landed using their home-made ropes but somehow managed to climb both these spectacular monoliths. They not only climbed them (both the men and the women), but carried barrels of eggs and birds down from the summit for transport back to Hirta. Stac Lee is the most impressive climb (Stac-an-Armin has a less precipitous side) but if you look very closely you can spot a series of narrow diagonal ledges that zigzag up the southwest face and allow ascent to the sloping roof of the stack. If you look even more closely, near the top on the left side, you should be able to spot the entrance to the bothy.

The St. Kildans would launch expeditions of several days to Boreray, Stac Lee and Stac-an-Armin. Normally the boat and crew would row back to Hirta and return to pick them up several days later. For such trips, the birders built small shelters called “bothies” on each of the rocks. The one on Stac Lee, a small, inclined crack high on the southwestern cliff-face, would only hold a couple of men. The one on Stac-an-Armin was a larger, free-standing structure that would hold about a dozen people crammed together for warmth. Indeed, one of the most remarkable stories of human survival occurred on Stac-an-Armin in 1727 and 1728. On Aug.15, 1727, three men and eight boys were ferried over to Stac-an-Armin for a multiple-day birding expedition. However,



Left: Stac an Armin. Right: Birding on Stac an Armin (photo by G.W.Wilson).

while they were there a smallpox epidemic broke out in the village as a result of contaminated clothing brought back from the mainland after a St. Kildan died of the disease there. The village was so decimated that the islanders were unable to man a boat to bring the birders back to Hirta. Somehow the eleven survived on the rock by drinking water from a spring, eating birds and eggs and huddling together in the bothy. Eventually, thanks to the efforts of the local land steward on the island, they were miraculously rescued on May 13, 1728, after a nine month stay on Stac-an-Armin. It says something about how the islanders were viewed by their landlords, that none of the names of the survivors were recorded.

Stac-an-Armin is remembered for one other, less fortunate event. In July of 1840, the last great auk (or “garefowl”) in the British Isles was caught on Stac-an-Armin by three birders. They tied it up and kept it alive for three days before beating it to death with a stick, because they believed it to be a witch. A few years later, in 1852, the last great auk in the world was killed and the bird became extinct.

Trailhead and Adventure

For years I had thought to visit this extraordinary place. Finally, on Jun.29, 2012, I caught a plane out of Belfast City Airport and flew by way of Glasgow to Stornoway, the principal airport in the Outer Hebrides. There I collected a little car from the Hebrides Car Rental Company, made my way through the town of Stornoway and out onto the narrow road that runs the length of the connected islands of Lewes and Harris. With most of the day to spare, I detoured to visit the Stones at Calanais, a miniature version of Stonehenge constructed over 4500 years ago, and the Dun Carloway Broch, an Iron Age stone castle with double walls and multiple floors. Whoever occupied these ancient structures they seemed utterly beyond the known compared with the very real individuals who lived on Hirta. Continuing on through the stone and heather landscape I crossed from Lewes into Harris, drove over the narrow isthmus at Tarbert into South Harris and along the narrowing single-lane road to the tiny port of Leverburgh. There I spent the night at a lovely little bed and breakfast called Carminish House run by Pete and Val Prince; near the southern tip of Harris this has the advantage of being within easy walking distance of both the Leverburgh Pier and a pleasant restaurant called the Anchorage. Bright and early the next morning I joined the small group of about 10 booked on the day trip to St. Kilda with Sea Harris and captain Seamus Morrison. To get to St. Kilda and back in one day requires a high-speed boat like Sea Harris’s MV Enchanted Isle, an Interceptor 42 with a cruising speed of 18 knots and a high speed of 29 knots. A very similar boat operated by a rival company, St. Kilda Cruises, was moored alongside and the two boats traveled together in a sensible and safer cruising arrangement. On that day, June.30, 2012, we were fortunate with the blue-sky weather and lucky with the relatively calm ocean; in these northern latitudes there are many days when the trip cannot be made because of the dangers involved in landing on Hirta.

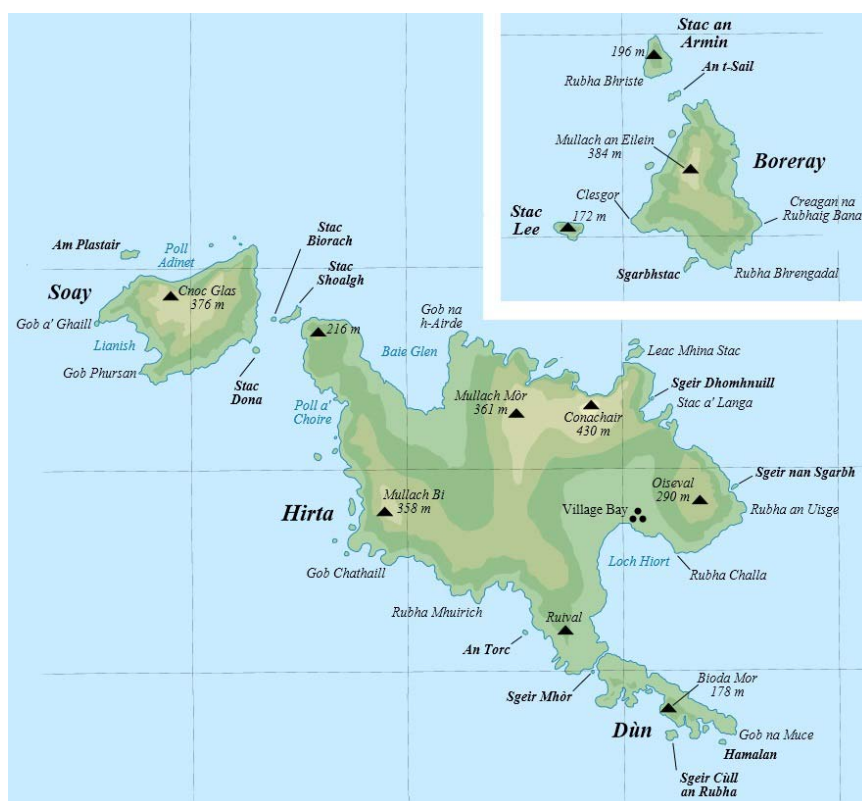
Thus began a spectacular and beautiful day visit to the storied archipelago of St.Kilda. Five at a time we were ferried from the MV Enchanted Isle to the rough village jetty in an inflated Zodiac and then allowed to wander through the village and up the slopes of Hirta. I climbed to the Gap to enjoy the fantastic view over to Boreray and the sea stacks while gannets, fulmars and skuas swirled overhead. Too soon it was time to leave. We were transported back to the boat and, as the crew made preparations for the return to the mainland, I could not help but look back at the remains of the village. My thoughts were of sadness for both the village and the individuals who lived there. I tried to envisage how the last 36 island residents must have felt as they were ferried to the ship on that morning of Friday, Aug.29, 1930.

A number of factors contributed to the demise of the St.Kildan community. Increasingly over the last two hundred years, contact with the larger world brought both problems and opportunities. The younger and more adventurous saw greater opportunity elsewhere and chose to leave, to seek their fortune in the world beyond the island. Eventually, there were too few young, strong arms and too little vital energy to sustain the island community. Moreover, changing economic conditions on the mainland created unsupportable financial pressures on the island and led to untenable living conditions for the villagers. Their culture and tradition had been based on a barter system and a tradition of sharing obligations and resources. The increasing intrusion of the cash system used in the world beyond further eroded the island economy. The people of St.Kilda were too old and too few in number to adjust to the modern world. Perhaps these commercial realities were inevitable given the huge gulf between the island culture and that of the mainland. But another externally-generated malaise was not unavoidable. In the decade of the 1820s, religious upheavals and zealotry in Scotland led to a dominant over-bearing church that was very destructive to the island community. Rev. John MacDonald arrived in 1822 to minister to the population and preached 13 lengthy sermons during the first 11 days. All the inhabitants were required to attend. Moreover he returned on a regular basis, subjecting the islanders to more of the same. Some years later his successor, Rev. Neil Mackenzie, who arrived on Jul.3, 1830, continued the zealotry. He, at least, is recognized as improving aspects of the islanders living conditions. But the Rev. John Mackay who arrived in 1865 increased the zealotry and gloom. He initiated church practices that were critically detrimental to the island well-being, three-hour-long Sunday sermons at which attendance was obligatory as well as long services on the other days of the week. These impositions made substantial inroads into the time, energy and spirit that the islanders needed for their farming, birding and fishing. They also eliminated the carefree activities that helped strengthen the spirit of the islanders. In short, organized religious zealotry was a cancer that ate away at the St. Kildan community and, along with the changing financial conditions, led to the island's inevitable demise.

But Hirta was still the only home that most of them knew and the only community in which they would ever feel comfortable. Most of them could see that the community conditions had sunk to the point where some radical change was needed. The government was unwilling to provide adequate help so that, in

the end, the islanders were persuaded by the resident nurse, Williamina Barclay, that total evacuation was their only option. Of course, this was a fallacy for the government expense that would have allowed these people to remain in their homeland would have been trivial. So the 36 islanders became victims of man's inhumanity to man, victims of an insensitive government resorting to convenience. Very few survived their relocation to the mainland and all suffered unnecessarily.

As the preparations for our departure continued I could not help but reflect on how these 36 souls must have felt as they boarded the ferry boat, the SS Hebrides, on the morning of Friday, Aug.29, 1930. The Hebrides would take them far away to Oban and Glasgow. In the years ahead a few would be allowed to make brief return visits and several were granted their wish to be buried on Hirta. There are moments of grief in all of our lives and in these moments it is hard to grasp the magnitude and direction of changes that are to come upon us. I doubt that the St. Kildans could foresee the consequences of this upheaval in their lives; I had known such moments and had also been unable envisage the future. I could not help but revisit the feeling that day in Village Bay.



Map of St. Kilda

2.2 Skara Brae

- Hiking time: 2.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 1 mile
- Elevation gain: None
- Permit: Entrance fee

Characteristics

Five hundred years before the construction of the pyramids in Egypt, Neolithic farmers on the bleak Orkney Islands off the northern coast of Scotland began the construction of the stone village that has become one of the most wondrous archaeological sites in the modern world. We now call the village Skara Brae (location $59^{\circ} 2.923'N$, $3^{\circ}20.498'W$). Construction began about 3200BC and it was occupied for about 1000 years before it appears to have been hurriedly abandoned, perhaps because of a storm though deteriorating climate may have also been a factor. The houses as well as the furnishings and tools therein have lasted some 5000 years because they were quickly covered over by sand and earth and because they were made largely from stone rather than wood. It is truly eerie to walk through this fossilized village, imagining the daily life of those Neolithic residents.

Like other works of man lost in the mists of time - like Machu Picchu or Xian's terracotta warriors - Skara Brae was discovered accidentally. In 1850 a violent storm and the raging Atlantic stripped the sand and earth from the top of a mound just inland from the Bay of Skaill on the bleak western coast of the Orkney mainland. This revealed the outline of a miniature stone village replete with walled houses and passages between them. Though the discovery was neglected for a long time and even plundered, it eventually received the attention it deserved and the subsequent excavations unveiled a remarkable



Left: House #1. Right: House #4?.

Neolithic culture. Today it is one of the most remarkable Neolithic monuments in the western world.

The people who inhabited Skara Brae were Neolithic farmers. They grew wheat and barley and kept cattle and sheep. The weather in their time seems to have been more friendly than present day but a worsening climate may have contributed to their abandonment of the village that was covered over by sand and earth about 2200BC. But the culture clearly flourished for many centuries and there is every chance that shards of their DNA came down through the millennia into my own blood.

In September of 2006, I traveled to Ireland to fulfill a commitment that, many months earlier, I had made to the school in Magherafelt, Northern Ireland, where I had received all of my early education and to which I owed a great debt for the start they gave me in life. The head master of the Rainey Endowed School, Magherafelt, had invited me to attend their annual prize-giving and graduation ceremony, to address the assembled school, parents and teachers and to present various prizes for academics and extra-curricular activities. It was a pleasure for me to do so for I felt there was much I wanted to communicate to the girls and boys who were just starting the adventure of life. After the formalities and following the usual agenda, all of the participants and friends gathered in the adjoining dining hall for refreshments and conversation. There I had the pleasure of renewing many old friendships and greeting many new acquaintances. The room was crowded and I found myself in the middle turning from one greeting to another, almost always recognizing the faces but seriously deficient in matching names to those faces. Then, suddenly, I heard a special voice behind me and turned to find myself face to face with an old flame from many decades ago; we clasped hands, holding them close to our chests. We looked in each others eyes and remembered a very special feeling from long ago. Then someone else turned me around again and when I looked back she was gone. But I was struck by the abiding memory of that special feeling from long ago; while everything else from that evening would soon fade inconsequentially away, that meeting and that feeling would be with me for the rest of my life.

Visit



Neolithic village of Skara Brae.

The next day, Sep.17, 2006, I flew to Scotland and, with stops in Edinburgh and Inverness, traveled in a small British Airways plane to the Orkney Islands, where I arrived at Kirkwall Airport in the pouring rain. There I rented a car and headed west through the rain for the marshy and desolate heaths of the western Orkneys. In modern times, it is hard to imagine why Neolithic farmers so valued this land. They invested great energy to build ever-enduring stone monuments upon it. I found a bed and breakfast room for the night and bedded down hoping for enough dry weather in which to enjoy my visit to this remarkable and unique remnant of the remote past. Thankfully the rain had gone by morning and, after easily finding my way to the edge of the Bay of Skaill, I was able to take my time enjoying both the exhibits and the ancient monument of Skara Brae. Though I enjoyed trying to work out the purpose of each of the pieces of stone furniture, my mind kept drifting back and forth from the ancient stones to the events of the preceding few days. These stone houses had lasted 5000 years and, no doubt, would last long into the future. Their story, their memory would never fade. I thought about my own memories from long ago and from the preceding day; those, too, would last forever, for me and maybe for her. They had the same rock hardness of lasting truth. Like those stones out on the edge of the Orkneys, the memories would sit quietly on the edge of my being without effecting the rest of my life. I would occasionally remember them and always with pleasure; but they would always be intensely private, always as secure and silent as the stones of Skara Brae. As I drove away the words of the renowned Orkney poet, George Mackay Brown, kept returning to me: "And think in Orkney of the old friendship of stone and man, how they honored and served each other."



Map of Skara Brae

2.3 Snowdon

- Hiking time: 10 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 7 miles
- Elevation gain: 2360 feet
- Topo Map: Snowdonia National Park Map
- Permit: None required

Characteristics

Dark age sailors, voyaging from Ireland toward their fellow Celts in Wales, were often guided by the snow-covered hills on the skyline that came to be called the Snowy Hills or, in Gaelic, “Snaudune”. Later the name came to be applied to the highest of these peaks, the beautiful, windswept mountain we know as Snowdon, the highest point in Wales. Those from warmer climes, on hearing that the summit of Snowdon is but 3560ft above sea level, might be tempted to imagine it as little more than a hillock. They fail to take into account the fact that, at these high latitudes, the change in climate with elevation is much more dramatic than at lower latitudes. One can drive to the top of Mount Wilson in Southern California and, at 5500ft, hardly notice the change in climate from the basin below. On the other hand, conditions on the summit of Snowdon can be radically different than those just a few thousand feet below. This means that Snowdon is a more challenging climb than one might otherwise expect.

Snowdon is the highest among a group of mountains in the northwest corner of Wales, one of the most scenic and historic regions of the British Isles. It lies in the ancient kingdom of Gwynedd, also the name of the modern county in Wales. On the coast below the peaks stand the remains of some of the most storied castles in Europe. And Anglesey, the island just offshore, is equally historic. Many of the ancient Britons, driven westward by the Roman invasion,



Left: On slopes of Snowdon. Right: Summit with Terry Jones.

found refuge on Anglesey, known to the Romans as Mona. There, these people on the edge of prehistory not only sought safety but also the potential of the arable land of Anglesey. However, in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, the well-populated island represented such a threat to the Romans that the new governor, Suetonius, felt it necessary to organize a campaign to subdue it. Thus it was that, in the year 61 AD, the Romans built a fleet of flat bottomed boats so that their infantry could cross the narrow Menai Straits separating Mona from the mainland. The Britons lined the shore to resist the invasion. They included women clad in black “like the Furies with their hair hanging down and torches in their hands” and Druids screaming encouragement and curses. Though initially shaken the Roman forces overran the island. As always, the history was written by the conquerors who were clearly doing their best to justify their uninvited ravages of a native population. Like many invaders before and since, the Romans proceeded to kill and destroy all they could find, leaving little to allow construct of the other side of the story.

In the centuries that followed the native Princes of Gwynedd, descendants of the ancient Britons, became the most powerful of the Welsh kings, benefiting from the natural protection of the mountains and from the fertile land of Anglesey. In the 1200s, Llywelyn the Great came closer to the creation of a unified Welsh nation than at any other time in history. The region was not overrun by the English until Edward I, following his accession in 1272, determined to extend his dominions and invaded Gwynedd, killing the last of the Llywelyns and destroying the remains of the Welsh resistance. To ensure the subjugation of the region, Edward built a series of formidable castles in strategic locations along the coast. These included the castles of Caernarfon, Beaumaris, Conwy and Harlech, that remain dominating features of the coast around Snowdonia. Edward also offered his first-born son to the Welsh as their new prince in a ceremony at Caernarfon castle that has been repeated by English monarchs ever since. The current Prince of Wales was so designated by Queen Elizabeth in a televised ceremony at Caernarfon some years ago. We should also note that the Welsh had some small, symbolic revenge about two centuries after Edward’s invasion when Henry Tudor, with princely Welsh blood in his veins, defeated Richard III at the battle of Bosworth Field and was enthroned as the first of the Tudor Kings of England. The Welsh like to attribute the vitality of the great Tudor monarchs, Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, to their Welsh heritage, to say nothing of Elizabeth’s red hair.

Again, Gwynedd faded into a backwater for many centuries. It achieved brief renown during the Victorian era when the demand for slate promoted the development of large quarries in Snowdonia, leaving livid scars on some of the foothills. There were also smaller-scale attempts to mine copper and other semi-precious metals but these brief efforts were quickly superseded in effectiveness by much richer veins in other lands. Tourism became the major industry in the early years of this century. Holyhead on the island of Anglesey became the major port of embarkation for Ireland and the construction of a railway through Snowdonia to Holyhead enhanced access to the region. Railways, especially of the narrow gauge type, had become a local specialty in order to transport

slate and ore from the quarries and mines. As tourism increased, narrow gauge railways were also built as tourist attractions. So it was that a narrow gauge, cog railway was constructed from Llanberis at the foot of Snowdon to the summit. Built in 1896, this triumph of Victorian engineering is the only rack and pinion railway in Great Britain; the 5 mile journey climbs an average gradient of 1 in 7. Today the Snowdon Mountain Railway continues to carry tourists to the summit during the summer months.

In 1951, Snowdonia became a National Park, a belated response by the British Government to the example set in the United States by Theodore Roosevelt about 40 years earlier. Today, it is heavily used throughout the year by a British public for whom it remains one of the few areas of relatively unspoiled wilderness in the British Isles. But, to the American visitor, there remain some intrusions that would hardly be tolerated in the US or Canada. For example, sheep roam freely throughout the Park, the ancient grazing rights of the local shepherds clearly unimpeded by the newly acquired status of the land. Sheep have grazed these mountains (and all others on these islands) for so many centuries that they have become a part of the natural order. One wonders how different the mountains would have looked without the sheep. Other human intrusions do not have the excuse of centuries of habit. Some of the lakes, including Llyn Llydaw, are used as reservoirs, which, in itself, is not necessarily objectionable. However the large diameter concrete pipe that carries water from Llyn Llydaw down toward the local towns and villages is an ugly eyesore, an inexcusable scar upon this land. No attempt was made to bury the pipe; instead it is suspended some feet above ground by regularly spaced concrete plinths that add to its ugliness.

Trailhead

Once, many years ago, I had driven quickly through Snowdonia on my way from Holyhead to London. I had seen enough through the rain and evening gloom to know that I wanted to return some day. And in the fall of 1992 I had an opportunity to revisit many of the places and people of my youth. In that year I traveled back to my academic roots for an all-too-brief sabbatical term in Oxford. Doreen joined me for the first four weeks and we delighted in this opportunity to revisit the city where we spent three years in relative poverty while I completed my graduate studies. We went to concerts and high table, delighting in the effortless elegance of the senior common rooms of Oxford colleges. We made many lazy tours through the Cotswolds, relishing marvelous meals in the gentle English country pubs. And we strolled through and around the city itself, exploring the many ancient walkways and tributaries of the Thames and the Cherwell. It was one of the best times Doreen and I ever had together and yet it was tinged with sadness for we knew we could not hide away there forever. The four weeks came to an end too quickly.

Left alone for the remainder of the term I busied myself with lectures, academic discussions and visits to other friends in England. My host in Oxford, Terry Jones, had been a graduate student with me in the Engineering Depart-

ment in the early sixties. I remember many hours when Terry and I had sat and talked over our cigarettes. I suppose we hoped that inspired theses would miraculously materialize out of thin air. He and his wife Lesley were at the same stage as Doreen and I, both with very small children. I had seen Terry very briefly on several occasions since those times. However, it was still surprising how easily we fell into the same pattern of chat, the same easy camaraderie. I have often wondered how it is that we sometimes find other people who fit naturally and easily into our personalities and vice-versa. Almost like two halves of a jigsaw puzzle. Not only do I experience pleasure in the company of people like Terry but I must also admit to a certain analytical fascination. Perhaps if I studied such people sufficiently closely I would find myself in sympathetic silhouette. There seemed to me to be many parallels between Terry's life and my own since our days as graduate students. On the mundane side we had both shed the nicotine devil and had both come to enjoy hiking and solitude. At a deeper level, I could now see in Terry some of the mindless drive that I knew lay within me. But more importantly, I came again to enjoy his company. On several occasions, I had mentioned to him my desire to see Snowdonia and when he suggested that we go hiking there together I eagerly agreed.

So it was that early on a Saturday morning in November, Terry and I set off from Oxford for Snowdonia. The drive is quite uninteresting until one begins to enter the hills of northwestern Wales. Despite the fact that it is the main road to the Irish ferry at Holyhead, the road narrows from a motorway to a winding, two-lane country road by the time it reaches the land of the Welsh at Llangollen. Not only does the quality of the highway decline significantly but, simultaneously, the names on the signposts become strangely foreign. Instructions to motorists are bilingual. Yet the faces of the people and the atmosphere of the villages were oddly familiar to me for they reminded me of my native Ireland, not really surprising considering the common Celtic heritage. Even more specifically one could sense the stern cultural overlay of non-conformism similar to my native Ulster, a feature that gives the villages an iconoclastic bleakness. My eyes see this as unattractive but this judgment is overridden by my affection for the culture and the people.

The road winds through increasingly wooded and hilly terrain and then drops into a very beautiful, forested glen at Betws-y-Coed, a favorite holiday base for outdoorsmen since the turn of the century. The substantial annual rainfall feeds marvelous rivers and waterfalls, making this area a favorite venue for kayakers and canoeists. Indeed, as we passed through the next village, Capel Curig, it was clear that a substantial kayaking event was being held there.

After Capel Curig, the road climbs toward the mountains around Snowdon and the land becomes bleaker. The trees disappear and the landscape takes on that aspect common to most land above 1000ft in the British Isles. Valleys were covered with heather whose accumulation over many centuries has blocked the easy runoff of rainwater forming many small, cold lakes. The uplands are rocky but have, to some degree, been rounded by glaciation. Only the hardiest grasses seemed to survive on these rugged hills, lashed for most of the year by rain and gales. At higher altitudes even the grasses have difficulty surviving and lichens

and mosses become more prevalent.

We drove to the gap through the mountains that is called the pass of Llanberis or Pen-y-Pass at $53^{\circ}4.83'N$ $4^{\circ}1.24'W$ and an elevation of 1205ft. A small group of dark, stone houses on the saddle at the top of the pass service the needs of the stream of hikers who stop here. One of these structures is a well-known youth hostel. We stopped in the crowded parking lot and were immediately approached by a group of very demanding sheep. It appeared to us as though they would attempt to eat just about anything including boots! It required quite vigorous protestation to hold these scavengers at bay. Eventually, however, we organized our equipment and food, strapped up our daypacks and were ready for the trail.

Hike

Very crudely, the summit of Snowdon can be visualized as the confluence of six ridges or spines running north, northwest, southwest, south, southeast and northeast from the peak. Glaciation during the ice ages scooped out great amphitheaters between many of these spines, leaving precipitous cliffs on the sides of the ridges. The spine to the north is the broadest and least steep and it is up this route that the railway runs on its way from Llanberis to the summit. Another popular trail skirts the great amphitheater between the northwestern and southwestern ridges; it then climbs the scree to the top of the northwestern ridge and thence to the summit. Actually two parallel trails called the Pyg Track and the Miner's Track follow this route, the former high above the latter. They both begin at the trailhead at Pen-y-Pass, where the road from Llanberis to Capel Curig reaches a saddle summit at an elevation of 1100ft. It was this route that we followed to the top, taking the Pyg Track during the ascent and the Miner's Track for the descent.

The Pyg Track climbs along the north side of the ridge that runs due west from Pen-y-pass to the summit of Snowdon. Quickly our view north toward Llanberis and the sea opened up and we paused several times to admire the scenery. It had rained the day before (and would rain heavily the next day) so we felt very lucky to have been spared a soaking. Better still, our view was relatively unimpeded; only the very top of the mountain was hidden by the clouds.

After about half a mile the trail reached a notch on the crest of the ridge and suddenly revealed a marvelous view to the south. Below us shimmered the lake known as Llyn Llydaw, lying in the bottom of a large bowl scooped out by glaciation. The other side of this bowl consisted of quite dramatic cliffs forming the northern side of the ridge known as Y Lliwedd. At this saddle one can choose to continue directly up the spine of the ridge, a very challenging climb along the jagged rocks known as Crib Goch. We chose to continue up the easier trail that climbed gradually up the south side of the ridge. Above us we could occasionally catch sight of more intrepid climbers negotiating the rocky obstacles on the ridge. Below, others were hiking up the other trail, the Miner's Track that starts along the shore of Llyn Llydaw but then climbs to meet the Pyg Track

that we were following. As we climbed the trail eventually graduated from the large glaciated bowl into a much smaller and steeper amphitheater containing the circular lake called Glaslyn. A ribbon waterfall hundreds of feet high fed the lake. At this point the trail became considerably steeper and rougher as it climbed the steep scree in one corner of this small amphitheater. Gradually we climbed into the cloud cover and the temperature fell quite dramatically. Then, quite suddenly, we reached the railway line at $53^{\circ}4.36'N$ $4^{\circ}4.78'W$ and an elevation of 3170ft and turned south to follow the railway for the last quarter mile to the summit. Here in the clouds, the temperature was below freezing and a thick frost covered all the rock surfaces. The frost had a quite unusual shape. The crystalline ice-stalagmites seemed formed by the combined effects of a temperature wavering below and above freezing, the continuous supply of moisture in the air and sculpturing by the wind. The crystals adorned the rocks and the rails and, with the mist, lent our surroundings a slightly surrealistic aura.

We paused briefly at the large, vertical lith marking the trail junction before walking the last few hundred yards along the railway to the summit. There, the station building was boarded up for the winter, but still served to provide some shelter from the freezing wind. About thirty feet above the station a substantial cairn marks the summit at $53^{\circ}4.11'N$ $4^{\circ}4.57'W$ and an elevation of 3560ft. We imposed on one of the many nearby hikers to take our photograph on top of the cairn. People were standing and waiting in the hope that a break in the clouds would allow a momentary view from the summit. One could detect that the top of the clouds were not far above us since hints of blue sky could be glimpsed. We also knew that the bottom of the clouds was not far below us. But we waited in vain for that break in the clouds.

It was too cold to lunch at the summit so we soon decided to begin our return journey. Retracing our steps down along the railway line we had no difficulty in locating the monolith marking the trail junction and so began the steep descent into the amphitheater of Glaslyn. Where the two parallel trails meet we left the Pyg Track and followed the Miner's Track down the scree slope to the shore of Glaslyn itself. Here the remains of a miner's barracks provides an attractive novelty. Perhaps the purist would see these ruins as an eyesore equal to the concrete pipeline. But to the average arbiter its age and the fact that it was constructed of native stone makes it quite unobjectionable. Terry and I ate our lunch seated on the stone steps of this antiquity. But we did not dally long for the day was ebbing. From Glaslyn the Miner's Track follows the shores of that lake and of the lower Llyn Llydaw. A broad track, it passes other ruined buildings from the mining era including the remains of the ore-crushing mill of the Britannia Copper Mine. Near the end of Llyn Llydaw the trail crosses the lake by way of a causeway that was originally built so that copper could be more readily transported down the mountain. Finally we contoured along the ridge back to the Pen-y-pass car park.

As the late afternoon gloom settled over the mountains and people and sheep gathered themselves for the coming cold, we resigned ourselves for the long drive back to Oxford. The gloom seemed to summon silence and was bolstered by the

Chapter 3

MEXICO

This selection of adventures in Mexico begins with a description of an ascent of El Picacho del Diablo, the highest peak in Baja California, and with an account of an aborted plan to climb Popocatepetl, the storied volcano that looms over Mexico City. It ends with three marvelous canyoneering adventures in the Sierra Madre Oriental near Monterrey. In the Monterrey Peaks National Park, west and south of the city of Monterrey, Mexico, there are a number of spectacular canyoneering adventures. These are rugged limestone mountains riven through with caves and with travertine encrusted canyons. Like limestone canyons elsewhere the blue-green water positively glows in the sun and the luxurious temperate foliage adds the final touch to a magnificently scenic canyon environment. In this collection we feature three canyons in this National Park, namely Chipitin, Matacanes and El Laberinto, the first two of which are world class adventures. Both Chipitin and Matacanes involve much swimming and a wetsuit is really essential equipment. Furthermore the local authorities require every canyoneer in these canyons to wear a PFD (personal flotation device or lifejacket) so don't set out without one. The wisest choice would be to contract with one of the local guide services such as Aventura (<http://www.aventura.com.mx/>) who are connected with the Hotel Hacienda Cola de Caballo, the best base for the three canyoneering adventures included here. To get to Hotel Hacienda Cola de Caballo drive 36km south of Monterrey toward Ciudad Victoria on Mex.85 through the Villa de Santiago and turn off the highway at El Cercado where there is a signpost for Cola de Caballo. Drive 5.5km up NL20 to the hotel entrance on the right.



Adventures in Mexico

3.1 El Picacho del Diablo

- Hiking time: 4 days or more
- Estimated hiking distance: 24 miles using approach from east, 14 miles from west
- Elevation gain: 8200 feet using approach from east, 5700 feet from west
- Topo Map: “Parque Nacional San Pedro Martir (San Pedro Martir National Park) including Picacho del Diablo”, map by Jerry Schad, published by Centra Publications. See also trail maps in “Camping and Climbing in Baja” by John Robinson and “The Baja Adventure Book” by Walt Peterson. Mexico 1:50,000 Topographical Maps, #H11B45, 46, 55 and 56, San Raphael, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and Algodon.
- Difficulties: Much rough bouldering and route finding, a little rope climbing
- Special equipment: 100ft of rope or webbing

Characteristics

The highest mountain in Baja California, Mexico, is a legendary peak known to the locals and all who attempt to scale her awesome walls as “El Picacho del Diablo” or “The Mountain of the Devil”. While the official name according to the Mexican government is “Cerro de la Encantada (The Mountain of the Enchanted)” and the mountain was known to some for many years as “La Providencia (The Providence)” the name, El Picacho del Diablo, seems so appropriate to all who have walked in its shadow that it is doubtful that it will ever be known by any other name.

This magnificent mountain is a part and yet not a part of a massive block of granite that rises from the parched desert of Baja California about 100mi south of the US border and 30mi inland from the dusty village of San Felipe on the shores of the Sea of Cortez. The range itself is called the Sierra San Pedro Martir most of which consists of a wooded tableland between 8000ft and 9000 ft above sea level. On the west, the land rises to this elevation through a series of rolling benches mostly covered in scrub and mesquite bush. The eastern edge is much more dramatic with great yellow granite cliffs soaring into the sky. In terms of vegetation, the tableland on top is quite a contrast to the desert below. Lush meadows and stands of fir and cedar are interspersed with delicate aspen groves. Great heaps of boulders, granite knobs and “chickenheads” protrude in many places as if to remind the explorer of the essential ruggedness of the land. To protect this beautiful place, the Mexican government in 1947 established the first National Park in Baja, the “Parque Nacional Sierra San Pedro Martir”. The only road into this park is a tortuous ribbon of gravel and rock that leaves the paved road, Highway 1, about 80mi south of Ensenada and climbs over the

benches to the west of the tableland, eventually, 50mi later, arriving at the gate to the park. Along the way it passes two small villages, San Telmo and Sinaloa, and, higher up, the Meling Ranch.

The high points of the tableland are on the extreme eastern rim and the highest of these is the 9450ft peak known as Cerro Botella Azul or “Blue Bottle” though even this does not rise more than about 1000ft above the meadow. El Picacho del Diablo is part of a sharp ridge that protrudes to the east of the main massif. This ridge stretches east from Blue Bottle and then turns north, forming between it and the main block a dramatic chasm known as Canyon del Diablo. This canyon begins just below Blue Bottle, travels north about 15mi and then plunges eastward through a gap in the mountains to emerge in the desert and form a great dry lake, Laguna Diablo, that is part of the San Felipe desert.

In his book “Camping and Climbing in Baja” John Robinson describes El Picacho del Diablo as ... *truly one of the finest mountains in North America. Composed of huge slabs of fractured granite, precipitous, almost inaccessible, towering almost two miles into the clouds, the peak is a challenge to climb, a wonder to look at.* It was first climbed by the legendary Californian explorer and map-maker, Donald McLain, who, after viewing the mountain during a surveying trip in 1905, returned in 1911 determined to conquer it. His account of the ascent from the west makes it sound deceptively easy. Others who followed found it much more difficult than at first appears. This is particularly the case when approaching from the tableland to the west, the route taken by most of the early explorers. Viewed from that vantage point it seems deceptively close. Some tried to traverse the ridge that extends from Blue Bottle to El Picacho only to encounter crevasses and knobs (“chicken heads”) requiring technical climbing gear and considerable time and effort. Others recognized the need to climb down from the tableland into Canyon del Diablo only to find it difficult to find a way up the mountain from below, in part because of the impossibility of seeing the peak until you are almost at the top and in part because of the existence of many blind canyons. After McLain’s conquest, more than twenty years would pass before the second ascent by a group of six Sierra Club mountaineers in June



Left: El Picacho from Observatory. Right: Entering Canyon Diablo.

of 1932. They set out from the tableland for what they thought would be a day hike along the ridge. Two days later they returned having reached the summit, but also having acquired a very healthy respect for the mountain. In the years that followed the mountain was climbed both from the east and from the west, but it was not until the fifties that Bud Bernhard discovered and described the one route up from Canyon del Diablo that requires no real technical climbing. This is known as Slot Wash and is the route that is described here.

These days successful ascents are made just about every year and many hundreds of climbers have experienced the majesty of El Picacho del Diablo. As with any challenging endeavor, there are also mishaps. In 1967 two Claremont College students, Eleanor Dart and Ogden Kellogg, were lost for almost a month before Bud Bernhard found Dart wandering in Canyon del Diablo. The two students were lucky to escape alive. That same year another climber was not so lucky. He had a heart attack and died while toiling up the precipitous Slot Wash. His friends buried him in a side canyon and continued on to the top to record the events in the summit register.

In this account we describe both the eastern and western approaches to the easiest ascent to the summit from Camp Noche in Canyon del Diablo. The time of year during which one could expect reasonably comfortable weather conditions for the ascent of El Picacho del Diablo, is quite narrow. Much of the winter and spring are excluded because of snow on the summit. At the other extreme, the summer temperatures in the desert are in the 100 to 110 degree range. Thus the optimal time is the late fall when the desert temperature has fallen and before the snow arrives at the higher altitudes.

Trailhead

One of the best written guides to climbing El Picacho del Diablo is John Robinson's little book on "Camping and Climbing in Baja". In there, Robinson describes two basic routes for the ascent, namely an eastern and a western approach.



Left: Entering Canyon Diablo. Right: Four foot waterfall.

The eastern approach involves a rough four-wheel vehicle drive through the eastern desert to a trailhead near the mouth of Canyon del Diablo. A long hike up the canyon then allows access to a base camp, Camp Noche, near the head of the canyon. To access this trailhead drive over the US-Mexico border into Mexicali. Head for San Felipe and turn west onto Highway 3 after about 90mi. About 20mi from that intersection, you will come to a clearly marked signpost for a dirt road turning off the left side of the asphalt road toward "Col de San Pedro Martir". Four miles down that dirt road brings you to the edge of the large dry lake, Laguna Diablo. About 15mi long but only a couple of miles across, this dry lake has clearly been formed by the run-off from storms high in the Sierra San Pedro Martir. You transition onto the surface of the dry lake and head southwards following tracks down the middle of the dry lake. You need to find the dirt road that leads from the other side of the dry lake to the trailhead. It is identified by rough signs (some on old automobile tires) pointing toward "Rancho Santa Clara". These lead to a dirt road that you follow past a primitive ranch and corral where you should bear right behind the ranch and proceed about 5mi to a trailhead containing several old wooden shacks and various leftovers from previous hiking expeditions.

The western approach involves crossing the border at Tijuana and proceeding southward to Ensenada. From there you continue south on Highway 1 for 83mi through Santo Tomas and San Vicente to the point 10mi south of Colonet where you turn left off the asphalt highway onto the rough dirt road that leads, eventually, to Sierra San Pedro Martir National Park, some 60mi to the east and 8000ft higher. The road is slow and climbs quite steeply from bench to bench as it ascends the mountain range. You drive through the village of San Telmo, and, after 30mi, pass the Meling Ranch. This 10000 acre cattle ranch that was founded by the pioneering Meling family in the early 1900s, dominates the western foothills of the Sierra San Pedro Martir. For many years it has been a favorite, out-of-the-way resort for those who enjoy remote spots.

After passing the Meling Ranch, the road again climbs steeply toward the tableland, and the flora begins to change from desert scrub to firs and aspens interspersed by meadows. You pass through the gates of the National Park and about 7mi beyond that emerge onto the tableland on a large meadow called Vallecitos that comprises the heart of the Sierra San Pedro Martir National Park. Crossing the flat meadow, you can spot the Observatory on a ridge to the east. The road forks at the bottom of the climb up to the ridge. Later you will follow the right fork to the trailhead. But if you have time it is valuable and interesting to take the left fork and drive up to the Observatory. Near the top of the ridge the open road forks right to the observatory village, a group of cruciform Quonset-like huts set amongst the pines. However, you should walk up the left fork (closed to vehicles) to the observatories themselves. From that vantage point there are marvelous views of the desert to the east and of El Picacho itself in the distance (beyond a range of nearby peaks).

Returning to the task of finding the trailhead, you should drive down to Vallecitos meadow again and fork left at the road junction at the bottom of the ridge. The dirt road proceeds southeast and 2.25mi from the fork you will arrive

at a large open space to the left of the dirt road where a number of large ducks indicate the start of the use-trail to El Picacho. If you are driving a four-wheel-drive vehicle and you feel more adventurous you can access another trailhead further along the road that deteriorates rapidly. This has the advantage of decreasing the length of the hike to the Canyon del Diablo overlook but I do not recommend this because that trail, though ducked, is harder to follow. Thus I recommend parking at the first trailhead.

Hike from the Vallecitos trailhead

From the 8130ft trailhead, hike up the broad arroyo following the ducks and the dry stream bed. Proceed in a generally southeast direction and follow the arroyo all the way to the rim of Canyon del Diablo. There are, however, several false ducked trails. Moreover, the trail leaves the stream bed and turns left at one point to bypass a brushy section but then returns to the same stream bed. About 2mi from the start you will pass the prominent Scout Peak on your left and a mile later, in the shadow of the even more dominant 9450ft peak known as Cerro Botella Azul or Blue Bottle, you should arrive at Blue Bottle Saddle.

The view that unfolds at Blue Bottle Saddle is awesome. A ducked trail leads 1000ft up a steep slope to the summit of Blue Bottle if you have time and energy to spare. The bottom of Canyon del Diablo lies almost a mile below you and yet, rising again on the other side, is an immense buff-colored wall that culminates in the twin peaks of the magnificent El Picacho del Diablo. It is quite overwhelming; on a cerebral and physical level it challenges you. I had great difficulty believing that it was possible for me to climb it.

From the Blue Bottle Saddle, you must contour around the south wall of the Canyon del Diablo to your right before attempting to descend. The more direct route straight down is known as Gorin's Gully and contains several vertical sections requiring rappelling equipment. Such difficulties can be avoided by



Left: With Citation at the Observatory. Right: El Picacho from Blue Bottle.

contouring far enough around to a large rubble strewn gully known as Blue Bottle Wash. Fortunately this route is well ducked and you should be able to find your way fairly readily to the wash and begin to descend. If in doubt continue to contour to the east. Then you follow the ducked trail as it descends Blue Bottle Wash. There are a few difficult places during the descent where large blocks of granite have created substantial obstacles and each of these require some route finding and some climbing. But, for the most part, the descent is just long and hard on the legs as you step from boulder to boulder.

Near the bottom it is a relief to come upon a small but sparkling waterfall tumbling out of a side canyon to form a clear and inviting pool. It is a good place to refill your water bottles. Downstream there are several sections of thick brush to push through. If you are nearing nightfall, there are a number of places to camp but, if there is time, it is wise to press on get to Camp Noche. Proceeding down Canyon del Diablo, there are several reference points. Several hundred yards north of the pool, you should encounter a clearing surrounded by thin logs on a bench to the west of the stream. This small site is Camp Cedar oak at an elevation of 6600ft. Camp Noche (6300ft), about a half mile further downstream, is a larger site on a bench to the east of the stream. An enticing swimming hole nearby will help confirm your destination.

Hike from the Canyon del Diablo trailhead

From the trailhead (elevation 2000ft), proceed due north parallel to the mountains. Crossing the dry gully, follow one of the many rough trails through a beautiful natural cactus garden on a gentle sandy downslope. After about a mile there is a small ridge that you proceed over or around and you should encounter a trail on the far side of this ridge. Turn left onto this trail that soon joins the river bed of the stream emerging from Canyon del Diablo. The stream is usually quite full, providing assurance of a reliable water supply. As you enter the canyon, it becomes clear that you are in for a scenic treat, for the stream has carved a magnificent gorge through these mountains, creating great granite cliffs and a canyon bottom with huge boulders and beautiful pools filled with crystal clear water. But you will also make slow progress because of the frequent need to climb around waterfalls or over giant boulders. Early on you are faced with a small 4ft waterfall that presents a special challenge. Because the pool below it is over 6ft deep and there are no foot or hand holds either under the waterfall or on the smooth, vertical walls on either side, it would be extremely difficult to surmount this obstacle.

Fortunately, someone has fixed a pin in the rock high on the left-hand wall and hung a steel rope from this pin. The strategy is to climb up the left side using the steel cable and then use either the cable or your own rope attached to it to swing up and over the waterfall.

The next mile above the 4ft waterfall is slow going with much climbing and bouldering. There are many beautiful waterfalls and pools, as well as several marvelous camp sites. It is a good strategy to try and reach one of these sites for the first night after driving south from the border. At one point near the

end of this rugged section you need to follow the ducked trail that climbs up the left slope through the rocks and then contours through the bushes to a point upstream of a particularly difficult section where the stream comes down through a narrow, inner gorge.

Upstream of this obstacle, at an altitude of 2700ft, Canyon del Diablo turns south and the going becomes easier for the next five miles or so. Eventually, at 4100ft you arrive at a fork where you go left. As the canyon narrows here, the brush increases. A waterfall at an elevation of 4300ft can be climbed on the left and shortly beyond this you again go left at a second major fork. And yet again at an elevation of 4900ft, you branch left for the third time. About a mile beyond this you will pass Smatko Camp (elevation 5700ft) in an area on the left side of the stream. Then, finally, at 6300ft you arrive at Camp Noche, a long broad clearing on a bench on the left side of the canyon. The distance from the trailhead is about 10mi.

Summit Ascent

The ascent begins by climbing the large, shallow gully immediately above Camp Noche, named Night Wash by a group from UCLA who descended this way after nightfall. It is a steep but easy climb up a rocky slope that eventually reaches a ducked saddle at about 7400ft. This saddle leads to the much larger gully known as Slot Wash. The reason for this sideways entrance into Slot Wash is that the latter is too steep to be climbed in its lower reaches. From the Night Wash Saddle you contour around and then drop into Slot Wash. Here the going becomes significantly harder because you have to surmount many large boulders and a few steep falls. About 7800ft you may encounter running water in the stream.

It is a tough climb, not so much because of the height but because the terrain is extremely rough. Moreover, while the route is well marked by ducks for some stretches, there are others in which ducks are few and far between. Worse still, there are ducked trails that go off in what are clearly wrong directions. Thus you must stop many times for navigational purposes. However, as you proceed up Slot Wash it is not difficult to identify the prominent rock mass that divides the Wash at an elevation of 8200ft. Here, you take the left branch though, almost immediately, you have to climb onto a shoulder on the left side of the canyon in order to circumvent several large waterfalls. Shortly thereafter you climb a rough dirt and rock slope to a point where a steep wash branches off to the north. Ducks lead in this direction into a wash called "Wall Street". This leads directly up to the north summit of the mountain.

At this point, we should note that the summit of El Picacho del Diablo consists of a very steep and ragged ridge of granite. At the ends of this short ridge are the north and south summits measuring 10154ft and 10152ft respectively. It is a difficult, technical climb to get from one summit to the other, for there are several gaps and knobs that present substantial obstacles along the granite ridge.

As you reach the summit, a truly awe-inspiring vista explodes before your eyes and you feel as though you have been propelled into space. The drop on the far side, to the east, is several thousand feet straight down. The dry lake, Laguna Diablo, lies 10000ft below and you can even discern the various dirt roads leading to and from it. Beyond this lies the inland coast and the Sea of Cortez. And, turning around to look back in the direction from which you have come, you can make out the Pacific Coast through the desert haze. But time is short and you have to start to descend to have any hope of reaching camp before dark.

Return to Vallecitos trailhead

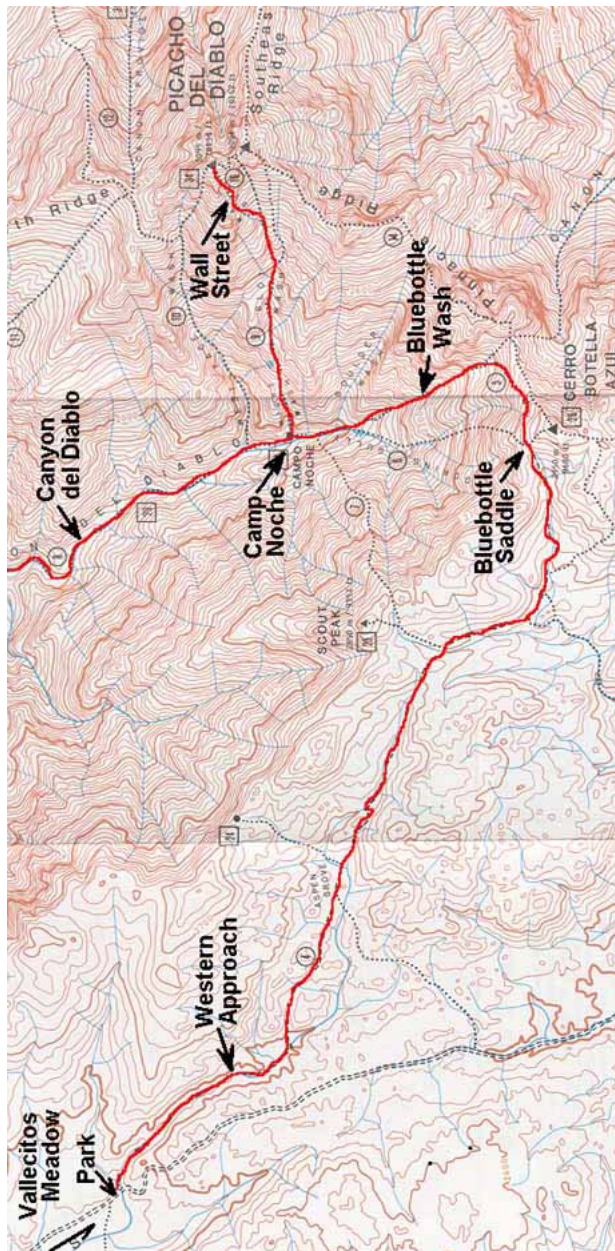
It is a long and tough climb from Camp Noche up and out of the canyon back to Vallecitos Meadow. You must be careful not to leave Blue Bottle Wash too soon to begin contouring right toward the Blue Bottle Saddle. But mostly it is a hard slog punctuated by rest stops during which you can again admire the magnificent view behind you. Finally, you should reach the Blue Bottle Saddle about lunchtime. Thus replenished, you begin the gentle descent through a shallow valley traveling northwest in the direction of Vallecitos meadow. The going is fairly easy, and as long as you head northwest, you will inevitably intersect the dirt road to the west. The trail is initially very well ducked and passes through some beautiful aspen groves. But then it seems to evaporate and you cross from one canyon to another on several occasions. With some luck you will encounter the ducked trail again in the flat, sandy-bottomed canyon that emerges onto the broad meadow where your vehicle was parked. It is a three mile drive north along the dirt road to the junction with the main dirt road to the Observatory.

Return to the Canyon del Diablo trailhead

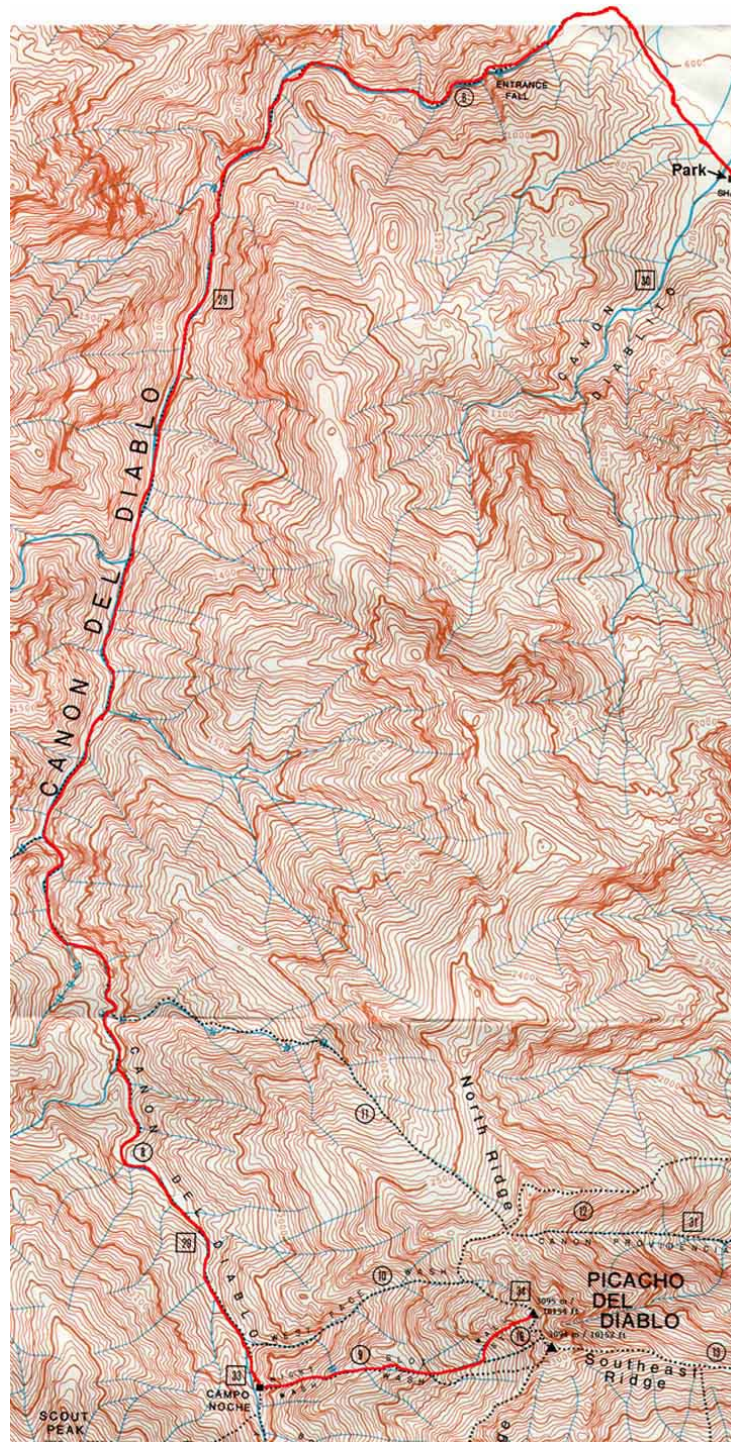
It is a long and tiring hike back down Canyon del Diablo toward the desert trailhead. After the exhausting hiking of the previous day, it would be wise to try to camp near the point where the canyon turns east and to negotiate the hardest bouldering early the next morning.



Left: Climbing toward the summit. Right: Peak of El Picacho de Diablo.



Map of hike to El Picacho del Diablo from west



Map of hike to El Picacho del Diablo from east

3.2 Popocatépetl

- Hiking time: 10 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 9 miles
- Elevation gain: 4966 feet
- Topo Map: Mexico 1:50,000 Topographical Map, #E14B42, Huejotzingo
- Difficulties: Steep snow slopes
- Special equipment: Crampons and ice axe
- Permit: None required

Characteristics

About 50 miles southeast of Mexico City, two massive volcanoes rise together out of the valley of the sun, reaching almost 18,000ft into the sky. The Aztecs called them the “Smoking Mountain” or Popocatépetl and the “Sleeping Woman” or Iztaccihuatl, and viewed them with awe and reverence. According to their legends, the warrior Popocatépetl fell in love with Iztaccihuatl who was the daughter of the emperor. After he had won a great victory against the enemies of the Aztecs, Popocatépetl resolved to return and claim her hand. However, his rivals sent forward word that he had been killed in the battle and, distraught, Iztaccihuatl died of grief. To assuage his pain, Popocatépetl built the two great mountains placing the body of Iztaccihuatl on one. He stands forever on the other, holding her smoking funeral torch aloft. Despite this association with their gods, Aztec belief did not forbid the exploration of these mountains and it is therefore possible that they climbed these peaks though no written or verbal record remains to confirm this. High on the side of Popocatépetl is a rocky projection known as the Ventorrillo on which were found the remains of a small enclosure that was built by the forerunners of the Aztecs about 900 AD. In the same vicinity, a number of artifacts including pieces of pottery, and parts of a jade necklace and obsidian knife were also found. In view of these relics it would be surprising if some young and adventurous Aztecs had not ventured up another three thousand feet to investigate the source of the noise and smoke.

Geologists tell us that, for the past 10,000 years, Popocatépetl (17930ft) has alternated between periods of vigorous explosive activity and periods of less effusive behavior. The activity has varied from mild steam-and-ash emissions to plinian eruptions accompanied by pyroclastic flows and surges. The current active period began about 800AD with an explosive eruption that enlarged the summit crater. Another explosion about 1000AD produced a pyroclastic flow that descended the northern flank. The Aztec codices provide an historical record of many eruptions beginning with one in 1345AD. Another large explosive eruption occurred in 1519 and another, perhaps, in 1663. Lava flows in the

vicinity of the summit may also have occurred in historical time but cannot be attributed to specific eruptions. The last significant activity occurred in 1920-22 though minor ash clouds were observed in 1923-24, 1933, 1942-43 and 1947.

In March of 1519, Hernando Cortés landed in Veracruz at the start of his epic quest to conquer the land of the Aztecs. By chance, when Cortés arrived in Cholula (near Puebla) in October, 1519, Popocatepetl was erupting. In a letter to King Carlos V of Spain, Cortés described the scene:

“Eight leagues from this city of Cholula there are two marvelously high mountains whose summits still at the end of August are covered with snow so that nothing else can be seen of them. From the higher of the two (Popocatepetl) both by day and by night a great column of smoke comes forth and rises up into the clouds as straight as a staff, with such force that although a very violent wind continuously blows over the mountain range, yet it cannot change the direction of the column.”

The Indians advised Cortés that it was not possible for anyone to reach the summit and survive. But, rising to the implicit challenge, the conquistador responded as described in the same letter:

“... I was eager to know the secret of this which seemed to me not a little marvelous and accordingly I sent ten men such as were well fitted for the expedition with certain natives to guide them to find out the secret of the smoke, where and how it arose. These men set out and made every effort to climb to the summit but without success on account of the thickness of the snow, the repeated wind storms in which ashes from the volcano were blown in their faces, and also the great severity of the temperature, but they reached very near the top, so near in fact that being there when the smoke began to rush out, they reported it did so with such noise and violence that the whole mountain seemed to fall down; thereupon they descended, bringing a quantity of snow and icicles for us to see....”

The leader of this expedition was Diego de Ordaz who claimed that, contrary to Cortés's account, he had, in fact, reached the summit. A number of chroniclers of the time give credence to his version of the story. Ordaz claimed to have looked down into the spectacular crater on the summit and compared it to an oven in which glass is made. Cortés may have down-played Ordaz's accomplishments because of a developing rivalry between the two of them. King Carlos V granted Ordaz the right to include a volcano in the family crest, thus giving a seal of royal approval to Ordaz's account of the adventure.

During his legendary march from the coast, Cortés approached the Aztec capital by climbing the pass between Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl and the saddle, at an elevation of 12,000ft, is now called Paso de Cortés. Two years later, in 1521, after his conquest of the Aztecs, the conquistador's army was running short of gunpowder and so Cortés dispatched Francisco Montano and four other men to climb Popocatepetl in an attempt to obtain sulphur from the crater. Unlike the earlier adventure, the story of this second expedition has been confirmed by historians and so must rank as the first known ascent of the mountain. With great publicity, Montano and his companions set out

accompanied by Indians carrying supplies including ropes and blankets. A crowd of spectators gathered at the base of the volcano and waited with curiosity to see how matters would unfold. At the end of the first day, the expedition camped some distance above the snow line by digging a snow cave. However, during the night they were driven from their cave by sulphur fumes and the cold. Outside the night was black, the stars being obscured by the clouds and smoke. As they moved about to keep warm, one of the soldiers fell into a crevasse, from which he was lucky to be rescued unharmed.

At daylight they resumed their ascent only to be halted by a eruption that caused them to run for shelter from the falling debris. Though one soldier could not continue, the rest pressed on and eventually reached the crater at which moment another minor eruption took place. When the smoke cleared, they could see roiling pools of lava below. They cast lots to see who would venture down into the crater first and, appropriately, it fell to the leader, Montano, to be the trail-blazer. Thereupon, he was lowered by means of a makeshift rope, some 600ft down into the crater. Not only did he risk the possibility of failure of the rope, but also the very real hazard of asphyxiation, not to mention the risk of another explosive eruption. Apparently, he survived seven separate sorties into the inferno bringing back a load of sulphur each time. Another soldier then took over and, after six additional trips, they had accumulated some 60lbs of the sulphur that had motivated the expedition in the first place. This they hauled down the mountain to be greeted like conquering heroes. A triumphal procession accompanied them back to the capital where, it is said, that Cortés himself came out to greet them. However, this method of procuring sulphur was not the most efficacious and, in a later letter to the king, Cortés admits that it was easier to order shipments from Spain. However, Montano and his companions achieved immortality for the first documented ascent of Popocatepetl.

Thousands of climbers have reached the top of Popocatepetl since the days of Cortés and Montano and it is now such a well-traveled trail that even fairly inexperienced climbers can succeed without undue hardship or danger. A winding, asphalt road was built from the town of Amecameca (elevation 8070ft) right up to the Paso de Cortés at an altitude of about 12000ft. From this saddle, the road continues some distance up toward Popocatepetl, terminating at Tlamacas (12960ft) where several facilities have been built to serve both day trippers and climbers. In particular, the Vicente Guerrero Lodge provides dormitory accommodations and facilities for climbers and other visitors. From Tlamacas, there are several standard routes by which to climb Popocatepetl, all of which we found described in R. J. Secor's book, "A climbing guide to Mexico's volcanoes".

Trailhead

After our successful ascent of the Mountain of the Devil, Doug Hart and I began to think about our next Mexican adventure and naturally started to consider an ascent of one of the large volcanoes. Eventually, these plans began to solidify and, with the help of one former Caltech student now resident in

Mexico, Francisco Avila Segura, and one current Mexican student, Roberto Zenit Camacho, we made the necessary reservations. The party would consist of a Caltech graduate student, Garrett Reisman, Doug Hart and myself; Doug's wife Ann would accompany him but not climb the mountain. We arranged flights to arrive in Mexico City on Jan. 8, 1995, and made reservations at the Tlamacas lodge for at least four nights starting on Jan.10. We had allowed time for acclimatization and visualized the possibility of climbing both Popocatépetl and, a day or two later, Iztaccihuatl.

Events

Date: Wed, 21 Dec 94 05:58:34 -0700

From: Francisco Avila Segura <fas@iimtemix.unam.mx>;

To: brennen@accord.cco.caltech.edu

Dear Dr. Brennen,

El Popocatepetl sent tons of ashes to the atmosphere today in the morning, it was not the usual 'fumarolas' but something else, you should be aware of this when you come and ask around. Roberto tells me

I wish you the best of fun in Mexico and a happy new year,

Sincerely Yours,

Francisco

* * *

Date: Thu, 22 Dec 94 04:27:25 -0700

From: Francisco Avila Segura <fas@iimtemix.unam.mx>;

To: brennen@accord.cco.caltech.edu

Dear Dr. Brennen,

Last night 75000 people were evacuated from around Popocatepetl, so it may be quite serious. It has been trembling and having small (apparently) eruptions. I call the people in charge of the reservations in Tlamacas to ask for information but so far they have none.....

Francisco

* * *

Date: Wed, 21 Dec 1994 22:18:05 -0700 (MST)

From: Global Volcanism Network <MNHMSO17@sivm.si.edu>;

Subject: Popocatepetl, 21 Dec 1994

A UPI news story reports that three explosions on the afternoon of 21 December (between 1330 and 1400 local time) caused ash fall in Puebla, about 45 km E. A resident was quoted as saying "The street is all white, as if flour had been thrown."

Servando de la Cruz (UNAM) was quoted as saying that the activity was similar to 1921 and in the 1940's, but that there was no other activity, and microseismicity was continuing "in a very moderate manner".

NBC News (USA) showed a few seconds of footage of the steaming volcano, apparently taken from a helicopter, tonight (21 Dec).....

* * *

Date: Thu, 22 Dec 1994 14:34:46 -0700 (MST)

From: "Rick Wunderman, Global Volcanism Network"

Subject: Popocatepetl, 21 December Eruption

..... A 21 December Associated Press story by Lawrence Kootnikoff said Popocatepetl, "spewed a column of roiling black ash Wednesday, dusting villages and farmland but causing no injuries." "Television footage from traffic helicopters showed a dense column of ash belching from the summit. Reporters aboard the helicopters said the ash appeared to be blowing away from Mexico City to the southeast."

A 21 December Reuter story stated Popocatepetl had "five minor eruptions". The story also noted that authorities estimated the mass of ash fall as about 5000 tons and that they had only evacuated a few people.

* * *

Date: Fri, 23 Dec 1994 16:47:45 -0700 (MST)

From: Rick Wunderman, Global Volcanism Network

Subject: Popocatepetl

..... A helicopter flight at 10:30 showed that most of the ash was issued near the lower rim of the inclined crater at the NE sector. A radial fissure could be observed on the NE flank of the cone. Some steam-producing vents could also be observed along the fissure, though the cloudy conditions makes this interpretation doubtful. Old cracks in the glacier appeared to have extended a significant amount toward the W.....

..... At this stage an evacuation of the most vulnerable towns and villages of the East sector of the volcano was started around 21:00 of December 21, and about 31,000 persons were moved during the night to shelters in safer areas.

..... As of Friday, 23 December, an AP report stated that the Puebla state government said 75,000 people would be evacuated from the countryside around the volcano. One of the evacuated towns, Santiago Xalitxintla, is located about 13km NE of the summit and sits along the road over the pass between Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl.

* * *

Date: Tue, 27 Dec 94 12:48:49 -0600 (CST)

From: Mena Iniesta Baltasar-IIM <mena@redvaxi.dgsca.unam.mx>
To: Christopher Brennen <brennen@cco.caltech.edu>
Subject: Roberto calling....

Dr. Brennen,

I've been following the news about Popo. The Tlamacas lodge has been closed. Twenty thousand people were evacuated. Reports from today's paper said that the volcano's activity hasn't increased in the last few days, but they are still under alert. It isn't clear when this alert state is gonna change. It is impossible to get to Tlamacas right now. Let me know what you think. Right now I wouldn't suggest you to come. It's unfortunate....

Roberto

* * *

And so, just days before we were to embark on this adventure, the mountain balked and we were forced to cancel our attempt to climb Popocatepetl. The volcano continued to rumble for several years and the lodge at Tlamacas remained closed. Thus, even if we had wanted, foolishly, to attempt the climb, the logistics would have been considerably more difficult. In fact, we did make preliminary plans to reschedule the trip the following year but cancelled again when it was clear that there was little change in the situation.

* * *

Date: Tue, 5 Mar 1996 16:58:49 MST

From: Global Volcanism Network <MNHMSO17@sivm.si.edu>

Subject: Popocatepetl Eruption, 5 March 1996

At 03:49:30 on March 5, an ash emission event was detected at Popocatepetl Volcano. A continuous seismic signal of variable amplitude started abruptly at that time.... Mild ash falls have been reported in the immediate area around the volcano, particularly in the North sector. During a helicopter reconnaissance flight, at 1200, ash deposits were confirmed, especially in the close neighborhood of Tlamacas, and covering the snow cap. An ash and gas column about 800m high rising vertically could be seen, height at which it dispersed in a long plume towards the NorthEast. A sulphur smell could clearly be perceived near the crater. The emission of gas, steam and ash appeared to be generated from the same three sources in the eastern internal side of the crater that produced the 1994-95 activity. In general terms, this event seems very similar to that of December 21, 1994, but perhaps about an order of magnitude lower, and comparable to the levels of activity observed on December 26, 1994.

And from another source: After several months during which only fumarolic gases were being emitted at Popocatepetl it is now certain that emissions of ash resumed this morning. I just returned from a helicopter reconnaissance flight around Popo. The glacier and snow are entirely covered by ash, confirming



Eruption of June 1997

statements made by direct witnesses who saw ash emissions this morning. From vents located at the base of the eastern inner crater walls a vigorous column of steam could be seen at 12.00pm from the helicopter. Seismograms indicate that the renewed emission of ash might have started this morning at 3.50am.

* * *

Date: Mon, 1 Apr 1996 13:39:54 MST

From: Hugo Delgado

Subject: Popo update

.....On Friday (March 29), during a COSPEC flight, Lucio Cardenas, Juan Jose Ramirez and Hugo Delgado observed the appearance of a lava dome on the eastern side of the crater floor with an area of 400 sq. m. emplaced on the rim of the inner crater (a destroyed lava dome that formed during the 1920-1927 eruption). This lava dome was observed coming out from a source outside that inner crater but flowing into it. Today (April 1st) the dome was checked again and was observed filling up most of the inner crater (nearly 60 m deep) and increasing its area to nearly 600 sq. m. Close observation of the phenomena is planned through helicopter flights and COSPEC measurements besides the telemetered seismic and geodetic network.....

* * *

Date: Fri, 3 May 1996 14:19:32 MST

From: Claus Siebe

Subject: Popo update

On March 29 juvenile lava that started forming a viscous, presumably dacitic dome was first observed by Hugo Delgado during a COSPEC flight. Since then the dome did grow at a rapid rate. Emissions of ash along a NE-SW running fracture located at the SE inner wall of the main crater have also continued intermittently. Apparently, the emission center of the new domes is located between this fracture and the center of the small inner crater formed during the eruption in the 1920s. I did attend helicopter overflights on April 10, 12, 24 and 29. On all these occasions the gases emanating from the dome did not allow a clear view. The height of the dome was difficult to estimate but was at least 50 m. The dome was in addition growing horizontally.... By comparing pictures of the dome formed in the 1920s with the present dome it is absolutely clear that the present dome is by now already much larger...

On April 30 at 13.19pm local time a major explosion occurred at the new dome. A shower of ejecta was dispersed towards the NE. Maximum clast diameter was 0.5cm in the village of Xalitlintla, ca 12km NE of the crater, sand-sized ash fell in the city of Tlaxcala at a distance of 60km. Because of bad weather conditions, the explosion and accompanying phenomena were not recorded by the video camera aimed at Popo.

Yesterday, May 2nd, five mountain climbers were found dead a few hundred meters below the NE crater rim on Popos slopes. Their corpses were recovered by Civil Protection authorities and the first information regarding the possible cause of their death was due to lightning, because of severe burns. Latest information indicates that the climbers ascended the mountain in the early morning of April 30 and were reported missing the following day. In addition to the severe 3rd degree burnings, the corpses do also show severe injuries by contusions. It appears that the climbers could also have been killed by the explosion on April 30. Autopsies of the corpses should soon reveal the cause of death. During a helicopter flight this morning (May 3) I could clearly observe a depression at the surface of the new dome, near the SE inner wall of the main crater. In addition streaks of gravel and boulders were running down the NE outer slopes of the cone. These streaks of course material were 10 to 20m wide and a few hundred meters long and very close to the route of ascent to the mountain that is usually taken by most climbers.

It is absolutely possible that similar explosions will occur again in the near future for which reason mountain climbers should take the signs posted at Paso de Cortes seriously and not attempt (by no means) to get around the official prohibition to climb Popo....

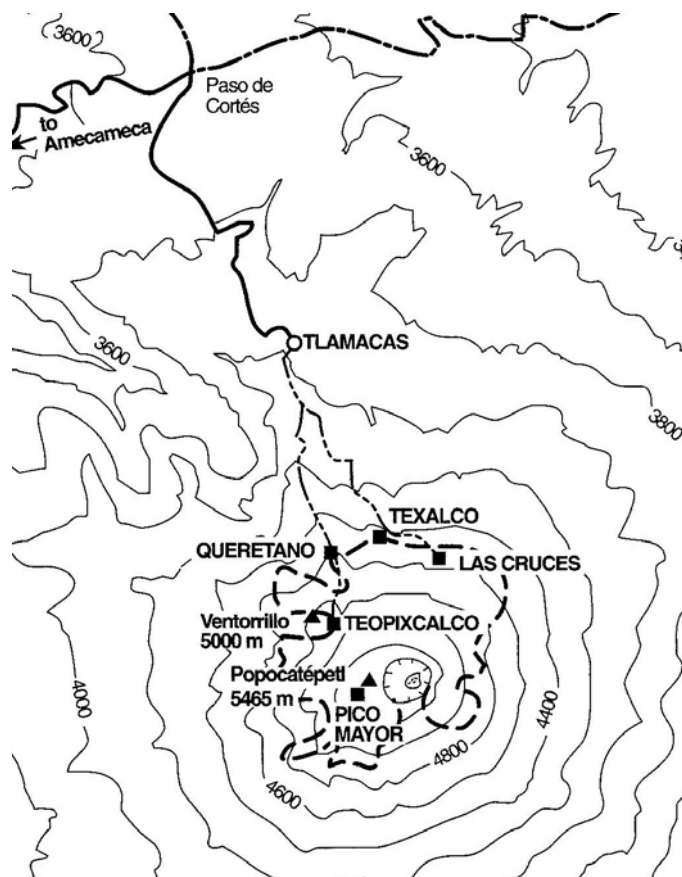
* * *

Nature, Volume 388, 17 July, 1997:

On 30 June 30, Popocatepetl showered ash over Mexico City, about 72km away, in its largest eruption since 1927.....

* * *

It would be easy to overdramatize the possibility. Nevertheless it seems clear that we came close to the fate that befell those five climbers on April 30, 1996. And so, within the span left to me, it seems unlikely that I will ever get the chance to climb Popocatepetl. Some things are not meant to be. But it would please me greatly to believe that, someday, one of my young friends might remember to place my name in the cairn on the summit of the “Smoking Mountain”.



Map of Popocatepetl

3.3 Chipitin Cascade

- Hiking time: 5.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 2 miles
- Elevation gain: 1100 feet
- Topo Map: Mexico 1:50,000 Topographical Maps, #G14C36 and C46, Allende and Rayones
- Difficulties: 7 rappels up to 150ft (one guided), much swimming
- Special equipment: Wetsuit, life jacket, helmet, harness, rappel device, extra carabiners and runners, two 160ft ropes, 30ft webbing
- Permit: None required
- ACA Rating: 4C III

Trailhead

Access to Chipitin follows most of the same arduous route as access to Matacanes (the next adventure) and involves a long drive up a very rough, mountain dirt road that requires a high clearance, 4WD vehicle. The starting and ending points for the Chipitin adventure are the tiny village of Potrero Redondo high up in the mountains. To reach Potrero Redondo from the Hotel Hacienda Cola de Caballo (elevation 2200ft) you continue up the asphalt road (Nuevo Leon 20 or NL20) for 5.5km to kilometer 11.5, the village of Puerto Genovevo (elevation 3640ft) where you turn sharp left onto a rough dirt road that is signposted to Las Adjuntas (10km) and Potrero Redondo (22km). This dirt road descends



Left: Entering Chipitin Canyon. Right: In Chipitin Canyon.

to a river bed and follows this to the small village of Las Adjuntas (elevation 1910ft) at a major river junction. The adventure of Matacanes comes in from the right here and there is a rural food stand on the right just before the road crosses the river.

The road then crosses the river and climbs steeply up the opposite slope. It also gets rougher as it climbs out of Las Adjuntas and then contours around the mountain finally reaching the village of Potrero Redondo at an elevation of 4260ft about 12km from Las Adjuntas. During the last few kilometers look for the spectacular waterfall of Chipitin below you on the left. This is the waterfall of the last rappel in this adventure.

It will take over 2hrs to drive from the hotel to Potrero Redondo. When you arrive in the village, proceed on for about 50yds through the rural village and down the hill where you should see the signpost to the trail for Chipitin, signed the Cascades of Potrero Redondo or the Chipitin Cascades. Park in the flat area a little beyond the sign. If you have not employed a guide service then you might consider engaging a villager to look after your vehicle and another to guide you down to the watercourse at the start of this adventure (but not to the falls themselves which would be the end rather than the start of this hike.)

Hike

The trail to the Cascades of Potrero Redondo goes to the left between two of the village farms near the bottom of the hill. About 50yds down the trail you come to the top of a gully where the main trail goes along the left side of the gully and passes a sign for the cascades of Chipitin. Do not take that trail. Instead follow the use-trail along the right side of the gully and work your way down a steep wooded slope veering right if you are uncertain. Soon you will emerge onto a dirt road that you follow down to where it crosses the stream. This is the watercourse for the upcoming hike through Chipitin. You should reach the stream (elevation 3890ft) about 30min after starting out. If you have not already done so you should don your wetsuit, harness, PFD and helmet here.



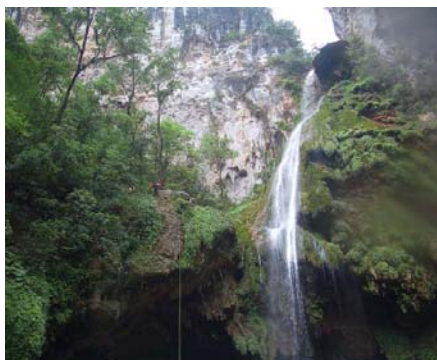
Left: Slide in Chipitin Canyon. Right: Chipitin Cascade from above.

The swimming starts immediately in a beautiful travertine stream bed with blue-green pools, overhanging foliage and some small jumps. Very quickly you come to the first rappel at 3820ft. This is a 30ft rappel from an anchor in the right wall down into a swimming pool. Swim a short way and then climb up the steep rock on the right to a shoulder where the hole-in-the-rock anchor for the second rappel is located. This second drop is an 80ft sloping rappel into a deep sunken pool. There are two options here. You can either rappel right down into the pool and then climb about 10ft to get out. Or you can veer to the canyon left as you descend and alight on the rock ledge before the pool. This second drop is immediately followed by a 100ft rappel from a hole-in-the-rock anchor on the left side down into an open area that once contained a large, deep pool but is now dry. You should reach this point (elevation 3640ft) about 1hr 45mins after leaving Potrero Redondo.

It is just a 50yds hike to the next rappel from a hole-in-the-rock anchor on the right side. A 150ft sloping descent deposits you into a deep pool with a swimming disconnect; it is a short swim to shore. About 100yds further down canyon a large tributary with flowing water (it may be the main watercourse) enters from the right. Here you must rappel down into the narrow slot through which this tributary runs. It is a 100ft rappel from a tree anchor into a narrow, wet slot with overhang and a swimming disconnect. Swim about 20yds to a gravel beach in this vertical-walled canyon.

At this beach (elevation 3430ft) you are greeted by a spectacular view. Just a short distance ahead the canyon proceeds through a narrow slot onto a flat platform at the top of a huge open vista. Between you and the platform is a deep swimming pool, and leading down to the pool is a most unusual feature involving a drop of about 20ft. This feature consists of a large rock mass with vertical slots at both sides separating the mass from the vertical canyon walls. The mass slopes down to the pool and in the middle of this slope is a groove, a remarkable natural water slide. Slide down and swim to the platform.

The view from the platform is awesome. In the distance you look out at a wide rugged valley. Immediately in front of you is a huge 280ft vertical drop into

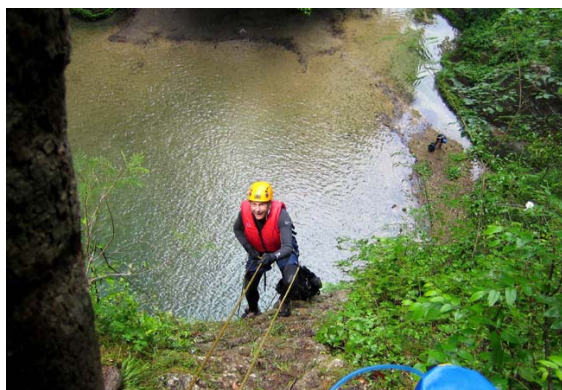


Left: Chipitin Cascade. Right: Upper drop of Chipitin Cascade.

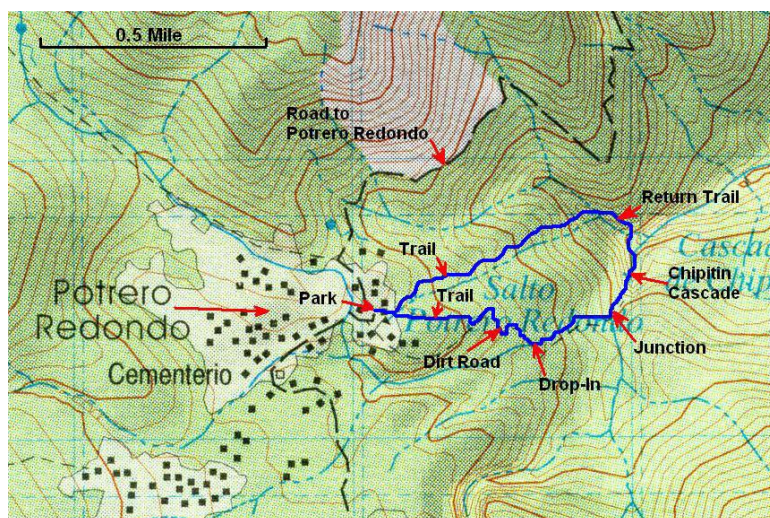
a large blue-green pool. It is enough to make anyone's pulse quicken. Descending this monster takes thought and planning. There are several bolt anchors on a ledge off on the right wall and a guide line leading to those anchors. If you have a 300ft rope you could rappel from those anchors straight down through the waterfall to the pool at the bottom. Otherwise you need to carefully plan a two stage descent. The first stage is a 130ft rappel down to a steep ledge on the right where there is a solid tree anchor for the second stage. This first stage is tricky because of the offset. The first descender needs to rappel down to the sloping shelf staying as far right as possible. Then he or she needs to make their way across to the big tree at the edge of the second drop. The rest of the party could descend the same way. Alternatively, as the guides usually do, you could set up a guided rappel for the rest of the party using a rope around the second anchor at the top and the afore-mentioned tree. Once this first stage is accomplished the second rappel is a straightforward 140ft free-hanging descent into the pool with a swimming disconnect. The swim across to the gravel beach on the left side of the canyon is the last descending move of Chipitin. You should reach the beach (elevation 3130ft) about 4.5hrs after leaving Potrero Redondo.

Before you leave this beautiful place you will undoubtedly spend many minutes looking up at this spectacular waterfall and the wonderful rock formations all around. High up the huge travertine formations create an enormous cavern behind the falling water and allow you to view these falls from almost any angle.

Inevitably you resign yourself to the hike out with some regret. The good trail back up to Potrero Redondo begins between two of the large boulders at the back of the gravel beach. It first contours downstream before beginning many switchbacks during the climb out of the canyon. You finally return to the village at the same trailhead where you started. The hike out takes about 1hr for a total hike duration of about 5.5hr.



Descending lower drop.



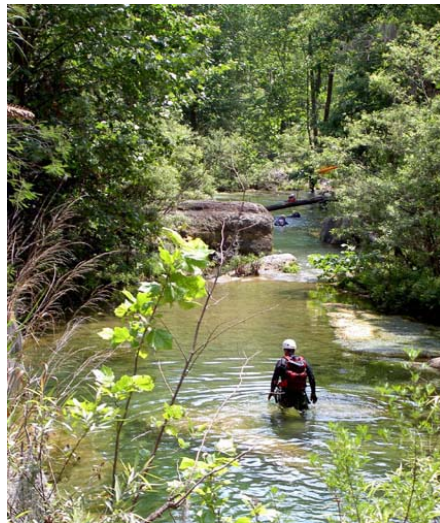
Map of Chipitin Cascade hike

3.4 Matacanes

- Hiking time: 8 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 7 miles
- Elevation gain: 300 feet
- Topo Map: Mexico 1:50,000 Topographical Maps, #G14C36 and C46, Allende and Rayones
- Difficulties: 2 or 3 rappels up to 80ft, jumps up to 15ft, much swimming and some downclimbing
- Special equipment: Wetsuit, life jacket, helmet, harness, rappel device, 160ft rope, 8ft webbing
- Permit: None required
- ACA Rating: 3C IV

Trailhead

Access to Matacanes follows most of the same arduous route as access to Chipitin and involves a long drive up a very rough, mountain dirt road that requires a high clearance, 4WD vehicle. However Matacanes also involves a long car shuttle for which you would need two high clearance, 4WD vehicles.



Left: Lagunillas Cascade. Right: Hiking downstream.

The starting point for the Matacanes adventure is the tiny village of Potrero Redondo high up in the mountains. To reach Potrero Redondo from the Hotel Hacienda Cola de Caballo (elevation 2200ft) you continue up the asphalt road (Nuevo Leon 20 or NL20) for 5.5km to kilometer 11.5, the village of Puerto Genovevo (elevation 3640ft) where you turn sharp left onto a rough dirt road that is signposted to Las Adjuntas (10km) and Potrero Redondo (22km). This dirt road descends to a river bed and follows this to the small village of Las Adjuntas (elevation 2330ft) at a major river junction. There is a rural food stand here in Las Adjuntas, on the right just before the road crosses the river.

The river that enters from the right here is Matacanes and so you need to deposit one vehicle here before continuing along the road that climbs steeply after crossing the river. It also gets rougher as it climbs out of Las Adjuntas and then contours around the mountain finally reaching the village of Potrero Redondo at an elevation of 4260ft about 12km from Las Adjuntas. During the last few kilometers look for the spectacular waterfall of Chipitin below you on the left.

It will take over 2hrs to drive from the hotel to Potrero Redondo. Just as you arrive in the village, turn sharp right onto the dirt road to Matacanes and proceed out of the village. Initially this dirt road is quite driveable but it gradually deteriorates and you should park and continue on foot where it becomes appropriate.

Hike

After leaving Potrero Redondo (elevation 4260ft), the dirt road rises and falls as it winds past small corrals and fields in shallow valleys of this plateau region. About 15min of hiking beyond Potrero Redondo at 4440ft the road forks and you should take the right fork that climbs another small rise. Eventually the road crests and starts down the drainage of Matacanes canyon. You will probably decide to park and proceed on foot somewhere near this crest for the road soon becomes too rutted to drive and transitions to a pleasant trail in a wooded canyon.



Left: Narrowing canyon. Right: First cave entrance.

About 1hr of hiking time after leaving Potrero Redondo (and at 3800ft) you will pass some large boulders sitting in the middle of the wooded canyon and, shortly thereafter, the trail climbs the left side of the valley and then contours downstream, presumably to avoid some lesser obstacles. Fifteen minutes later, just after crossing a tributary and descending a short section of bedrock, you will come to the wide rock shelf and swimming pool at the top of the first rappel in Matacanes. Suit up with wetsuit, harness and helmet and then wade across the short pool to the lip of the 80ft vertical waterfall that marks the start of the wet descent of Matacanes. This is known as the Lagunillas Cascade. The distance from Potrero Redondo to Lagunillas Cascade is about 3mi, and it should take about 1hr 20min to hike.

There are several good bolt anchors to the left of the water stream for this 80ft rappel that ends with a swimming disconnect in the large pool at the bottom. You swim about 30yds to the shore. After this first rappel there is a beautiful long and wide section of exquisite canyon with blue-green travertine pools, small falls and lovely foliage. Gradually the canyon deepens and narrows with some higher downclimbs and occasional overhangs with profuse limestone formations. Then, just beyond a short downclimb, you arrive at the gaping opening of the first cave, Matacan de Arriba, at an elevation of 2980ft. You should reach this point about 3hr 40min after leaving Potrero Redondo and about 0.75mi from Lagunillas Cascade. In the cavernous entrance to the cave, there is a 50ft vertical drop into a large swimming pool. There are several bolt anchors here: one on the nose in the middle of the lip and another on the right side where you rappel down through a hole into a slot on the right side. After the swimming disconnect you swim about 20yds to a gravel beach inside the cave. Here, in the dim light, you need to put on your head lamp for the rest of the trip through the cave. Immediately, there is a small 10ft drop into a fairly shallow pool (4ft deep) that you could jump from the lower right side or rappel from the chockstone on the left. The cave get much smaller and darker here with great travertine rock formations all around. Next you will ease your way along a narrow chute with a swift flow. In the pitch dark this soon opens up again into



Left: Entering first cave. Right: Exiting first cave.

a large pool-filled cave where you swim past marvelous rock formations toward a faint light at the end of the cave. In total, this first cave is about 80yds long and a fantastic experience.

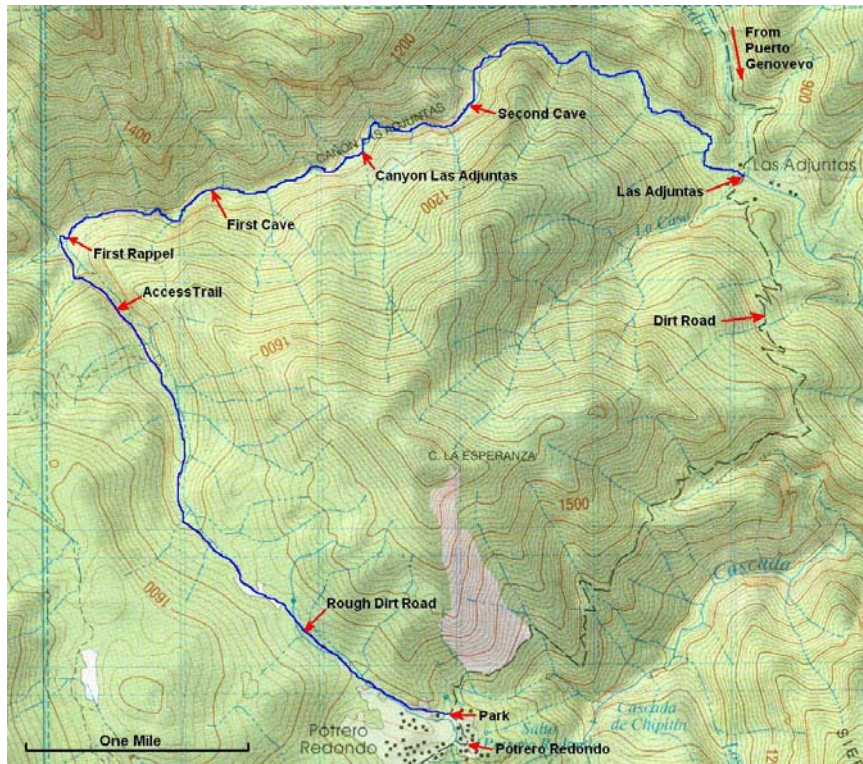
After the exit from the first cave, there is a long section of beautiful canyon with many jumps and many swims up to 100yds long, usually in narrow slot sections. By judicious route finding you can get by without any jump of more than 15ft. There are also some great slides - one of about 30ft. Eventually the canyon narrows and you come to a really spectacular section of “almost cave” and swim through pools with overhangs that nearly touch above you, hanging ferns and profuse limestone rock formations. It is truly a special place. Near the end of this section you will come to an unavoidable 10ft jump into a deep pool that leads to a similar second jump into a pool at the entrance to the second cave, Matacan de Abajo. You should reach this point (elevation 2620ft) that is about 2mi from Lagunillas Cascade roughly 5.5hrs after leaving Potrero Redondo.

You should pause on the shelf at the entrance to this second cave to switch on your head lamp before entering. Then you start down a very slight chute to the swimming pool that extends through the entire length of the cave. This cave is smaller, narrower and slightly longer than the first - about 100yds. Again there are spectacular rock formations and small side caves that you can swim into. When you turn a corner you see the slit of light that comes through the very low ceiling exit that is also overhung with ferns. The headroom at the exit is only about a foot.

Here after emerging from the Matacan de Abajo, 6hrs after leaving Potrero Redondo, you encounter signs of human passage with fireplaces and some unfortunate litter. Another section of slot swimming and small jumps follow. Eventually the canyon broadens, you make the last swim and there is an occasional use trail down the canyon. About 45min from the last swim you finally come to the end of this adventure and reach Las Adjuntas (elevation 2350ft). The hike from Potrero Redondo takes about 8hrs and covers about 7mi.



Left: Exiting second cave. Right: John Perry jumping.



Map of Matacanes hike

3.5 El Laberinto

- Hiking time: 2.8 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 0.5 miles
- Elevation gain: 270 feet
- Topo Map: Mexico 1:50,000 Topographical Map, #G14C36, Allende
- Difficulties: 3 rappels up to 110ft, one large stagnant pool. Special equipment: 200ft rope, 160ft rope for guided rappel, helmets, harnesses, rappel devices, 20ft webbing, various carabiners
- Permit: None required
- ACA Rating: 3B I

Characteristics

El Laberinto is mostly dry canyon though the major technical challenge is getting across one rather spicy pool in a narrow slot. The base for this hike is the same as for Matacanes and Chipitin, namely the Hotel Hacienda Cola de Caballo in Santiago near Monterrey, Mexico. This is a short hike and access to it are much more easily accomplished on your own than are Matacanes and Chipitin.



Left: El Laberinto drop-in. Right: El Laberinto rappel.

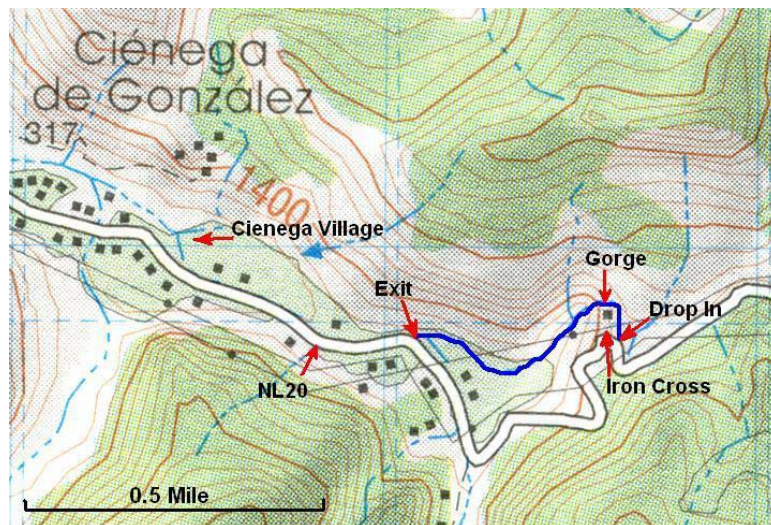
Trailhead

The starting point for the El Laberinto adventure is the village of La Cienega high up in the mountains above the hotel. To get there from the Hotel Hacienda Cola de Caballo (elevation 2200ft) you continue up the asphalt road (Nuevo Leon 20 or NL20) toward Laguna de Sanchez, cresting the top of the ridge and descending into the gentler valleys on the western side of the range. Your destination is “kilometer 19” about 14km from the hotel. It is a point where the road rounds a rocky headland and there is a large crucifix with a metal Christ on the apex of the curve on the right side. There is also a low stone wall and after you park make your way back to the east end of the wall. The village of La Cienega is about 1km further along the road so if you encounter the village you should backtrack. Park somewhere close to the metal Christ.

Hike

The hike starts at the east end of the low stone wall (elevation 4490ft). Just 20yds down the ridge from the end of the low stone wall you will find an anchor around a tree at the top of a vertical drop into El Laberinto canyon. The drop is 110ft but a doubled 200ft rope will reach a ledge with an easy downclimb to the bottom in the dried up stream bed. Turning left and hiking downstream it is just 50yds to the second rappel, a simple 30ft rappel from a bolt in the middle of the lip. Another 50yds brings you to the narrow gully for which this canyon was named. In this slot there is a substantial 60ft drop that can be tackled using several options. The first is to use the bolts about 10ft down the slot to rappel down to a broad empty pothole floor and then continue through a narrow gate down to a large stagnant pool that requires swimming. The alternative is not to descend into the gully but to contour over to the shelf on the right where there are several bolt anchors. The first descender from here must swim the stagnant pool but you can then set up a guided rappel utilizing several of the bolts at the top and a hole-in-the-rock on the right side of the beach at the far end of the pool. The guide rope needs to be very tight to avoid landing in the water. You should reach this point (elevation 4220ft) about 2hr 15min from the start.

The guided rappel is the main challenge during this transit of El Laberinto. It is immediately followed by a simple 20ft rappel from a bolt in the center of the lip. After this the canyon opens up and you walk down the gravel wash into the village of La Cienega where you veer left to get back to the road, NL20, at about kilometer 20.5. You should reach the road at an elevation of 4220ft about 2.5hrs from the start. Turn left and hike back up the road to your vehicle.



Map of El Laberinto hike

Chapter 4

COSTA RICA

This selection of adventures in Costa Rica begins with four canyoneering experiences and concludes with a two day river-rafting descent of the Rio Pacuare through tropical jungle.

The Central American country of Costa Rica is a prime destination for canyoneers because there the sport is significantly developed and, for US canyoneers, presents a new dimension of experiences. This is because Costa Rica has a spine of steep mountains and volcanoes covered in dense tropical forest. Consequently the canyons through this forest are spectacular and present very different flora and fauna, a very different visual experience than any in the USA or Europe. Many small companies run guided canyoneering (or rather canyoning) trips through their local canyons (for example Pure Trek Canyoning and Desafio in La Fortuna and Explornatura in Turrialba) These companies have developed “commercial canyons” and the trips through them are not cheap, averaging about \$60 to \$90 for a half day descent. However the first time visitor is strongly advised to sign up for these commercial canyons and not attempt any wilder, “non-commercial” canyons that might involve unwitting trespass or worse. In this chapter we describe a number of commercial canyons that the author descended and recommends, some near La Fortuna in the Arenal Volcano area northwest of San Jose and some near Turrialba southeast of San Jose. For balance we also describe a “non-commercial” canyon near Turrialba though a guide would also be needed to find the entrance to and exit from that canyon.

The defect with commercial canyons is that they have usually been significantly altered to ease the passage for the guides and their clients. These alterations often include the installation not only of extensive fixed anchors but also of wooden platforms from which to enter the rappels. Some even have steps cut in the canyon bottom rock to ease downclimbs while in other canyons trails conduct the clients from one rappel to the next. Despite these alterations the canyons are spectacularly beautiful with luxurious multi-level canopies of tropical forest and exotic flora and fauna. It is a unique experience for a howler

monkey to let loose with its terrifying howl just as you are about to enter a 150ft free rappel! Many of the adventure companies also offer zip-line canopy adventures; for example Explornatura offers a combined zip-line and waterfall rappel descent of Puente Vigas Canyon near Turrialba.



Adventures in Costa Rica

4.1 Piedra Canyon

- Hiking time: 2 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 2.4 mi
- Elevation gain: 210 feet
- Topo Map: Costa Rica 1:50,000 Topographical Map, #3247-11, Fortuna
- Difficulties: 4 rappels up to 120ft
- Special equipment: Helmet, harness, rappel device, two 160ft ropes, 4 quicklinks, 30ft webbing (all equipment provided on guided descent)
- Permit: Guided Tour with Desafio, La Fortuna (www.desafiocostarica.com).
Price: \$85
- ACA Rating: 3B I

Characteristics

Piedra Canyon (translated as Stone Canyon but also known as Lost Canyon) is the commercial canyon used by the Desafio adventure company of La Fortuna. It features several big rappels (two from overhung wooden platforms) and some downclimbing in a glorious tropical canyon with just a modest water flow. The guides accept beginners (and a maximum of two children) and provide transport to and from La Fortuna.



Left: Second rappel in Piedra Canyon. Right: Downclimbing in Piedra Canyon.

Trailhead

From La Fortuna you take the road toward La Tigre and San Ramon until you get to 10°27.05'N 84°37.66'W where you should look for the Rancho de Mina snack bar on the right side of the road. Take the dirt road that goes off to the right just beyond the snackbar. Drive up the steep dirt road past several farms to the corrugated iron-roofed Desafio shelter at 10°26.06'N 84°38.47'W (elevation 1400ft). Proceed on up the dirt road taking a right fork at the Pure Trek Canyoneering sign. About 1.1km from the Desafio shelter you will come to a place where the dirt road branches, one branch turning 90 degrees right. This is the drop-in point for Piedra Canyon at 10°25.71'N 84°38.54'W and an elevation of 1680ft.

Hike

From the drop-off point on the dirt road at 10°25.71'N 84°38.54'W and an elevation of 1680ft, follow the partly paved trail to the right along the side of a field for about 100yds and descend into a shallow wooded canyon. Here Desafio has constructed a wooden platform where the guides equip and instruct their tour groups and get them to do a small, practice rappel from the platform. Just below this platform is the first rappel, a 20ft drop down a sloping groove with a small stream. Just 50yds beyond this there is another, much higher and more exposed platform at the top of the 110ft second rappel. The first 50ft of this descent is a free rappel from the platform. At the bottom it drops you, unexpectedly, into a small deep pool. You should reach the bottom of this

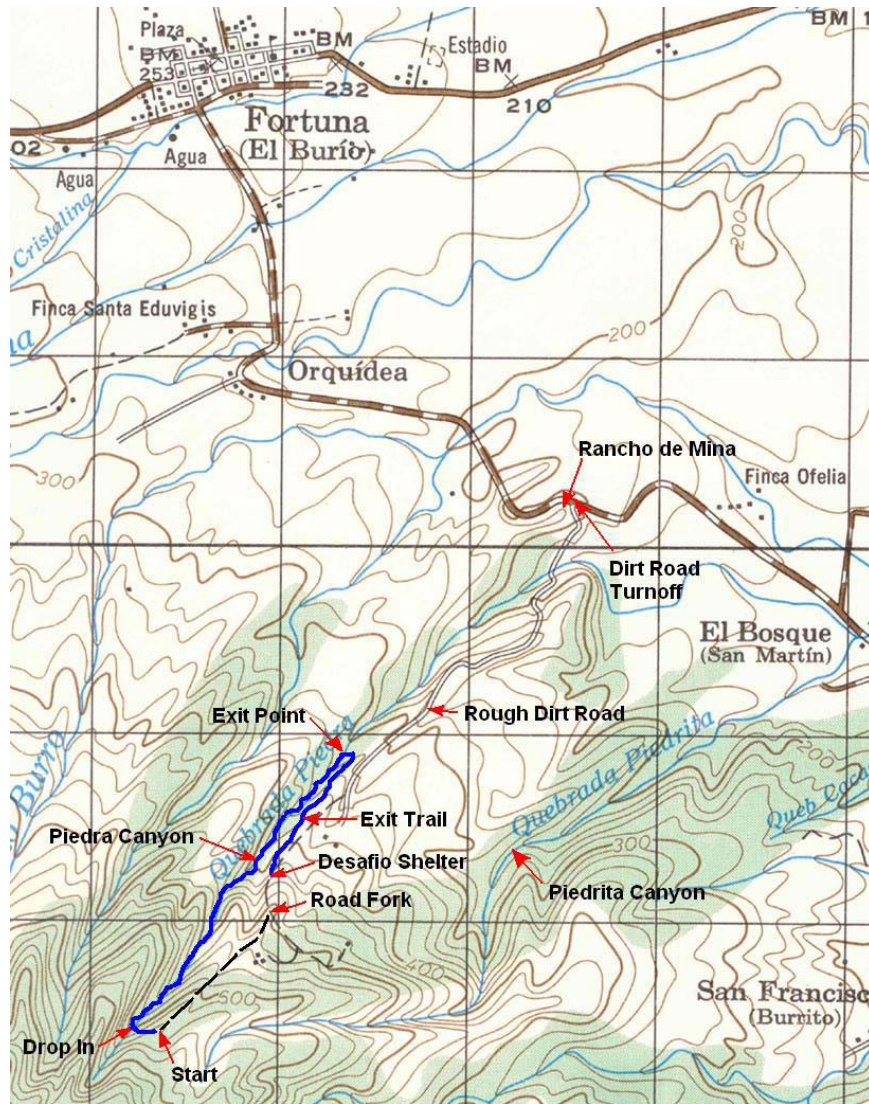


Left: Downclimbing in Piedra Canyon. Right: Last big drop in Piedra Canyon.

second rappel (elevation 1490ft) about 30min after the start. Below it there is further descent aided by steps cut in the inclined rock.

Downstream of the second rappel it is about 100yds to a neat downclimbing slot and this begins a section of canyon with a series of downclimbs and boulder-hopping. This is a beautiful place with great overhanging tropical canopy and a sparkling stream. All too soon you come to the top of the last series of rappels at 1240ft about 1hr 15min from the start. This last series starts with a 120ft rappel from a dramatically overhung platform. It begins with a section of free rappel but drops into the cascading waterfall for the lower half. Immediately below this is a short 12ft rappel from a tree anchor on the right. You should reach the bottom of this last rappel at an elevation of 1210ft about 1hr 30min from the start.

Just below this last rappel another large canyon enters on the left. Take a moment to walk a short way up this canyon to see a very pretty waterfall similar to the one you just descended. Then, resuming the canyon descent, the trail makes two short bypasses on the right, and just beyond the second you will come to the start of the canyon exit trail on the right (elevation 1170ft). This trail switchbacks up the steep canyon side to the access dirt road and the Desafio exit shelter noted earlier during the approach. You should reach this shelter at 10°26.06'N 84°38.47'W and an elevation of 1380ft about 2hrs after the start of the descent.



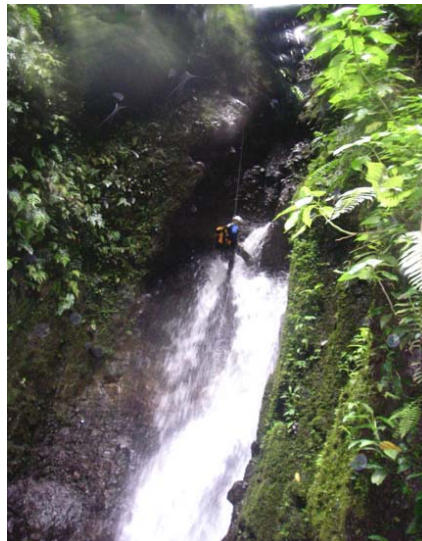
Map of Piedra Canyon hike

4.2 Piedrita Canyon

- Hiking time: 2.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 1.8 miles
- Elevation gain: 270 feet
- Topo Map: Costa Rica 1:50,000 Topographical Map, #3247-11, Fortuna
- Difficulties: 5 rappels up to 150ft
- Special equipment: Helmet, harness, rappel device, two 160ft ropes, 30ft webbing, 5 quicklinks (all equipment provided on guided descent)
- Permit: Guided Tour with Pure Trek, La Fortuna (www.puretrek.com).
Price: \$90
- ACA Rating: 3C I

Characteristics

Piedrita Canyon (translated as Little Stone Canyon) is the commercial canyon used by the Pure Trek Canyoning adventure company of La Fortuna. It features several big rappels from overhung wooden platforms and descents through quite vigorous waterfalls. The guides provide transport to and from La Fortuna.



Left: First rappel in Piedrita Canyon. Right: Second rappel (photo by Lauren Jefferis).

Trailhead

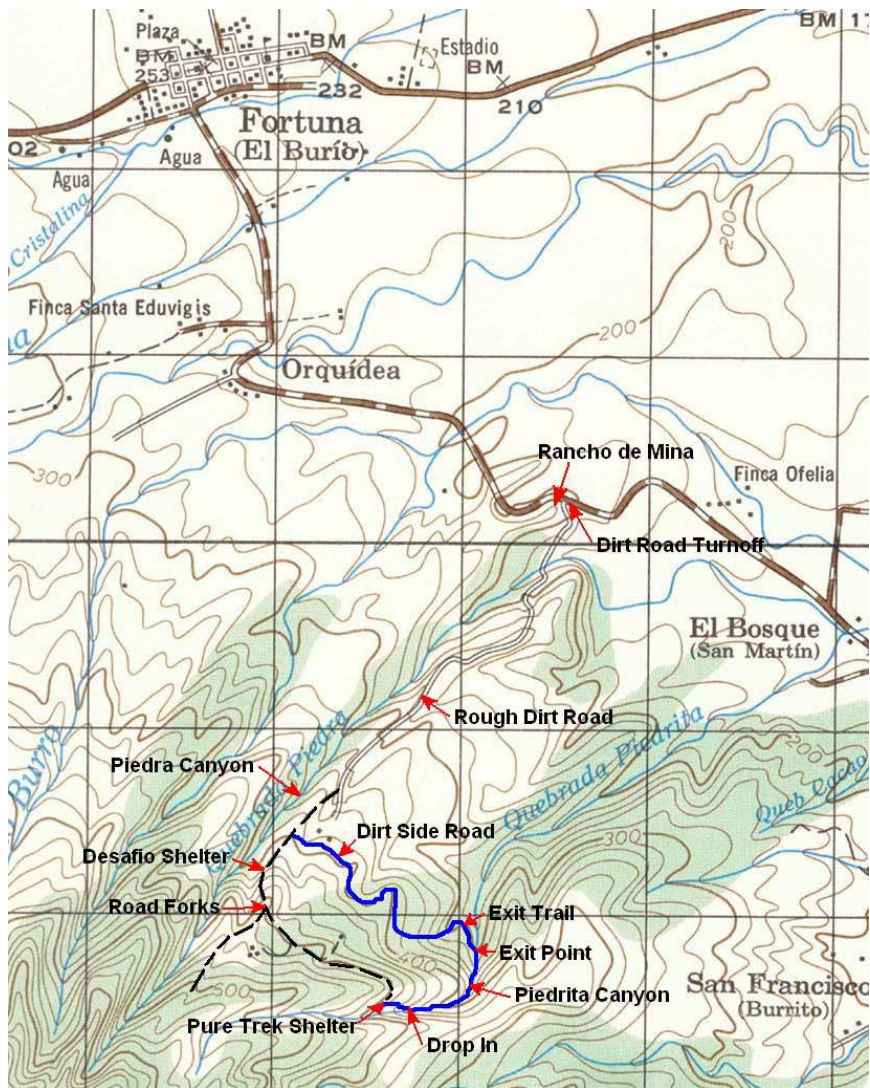
From La Fortuna you take the road toward La Tigre and San Ramon until you get to 10°27.05'N 84°37.66'W where you should look for the Rancho de Mina snack bar on the right side of the road. Take the dirt road that goes off to the right just beyond the snackbar. Drive up the steep dirt road past several farms to the corrugated iron roofed Desafio shelter at 10°26.06'N 84°38.47'W (elevation 1400ft). Proceed on up the dirt road for about 300yds to a fork in the road where you follow the Pure Trek Canyoneering sign and fork left. About 100yds down this fork you will find the Pure Trek shelter on the right where Pure Trek Canyoning equips and instructs their clients.

Hike

From the Pure Trek instruction shelter at 1510ft you follow the trail that switchbacks down into the wooded canyon. About 300yds from the shelter you come to a wooden platform overlooking the biggest rappel in the canyon, a 150ft rappel that descends down beside an impressive waterfall into a cliff-ringed clearing in which the mist of the waterfall is constantly swirling. From the bottom of this first rappel follow the trail on the left for a short distance down to a platform bridging a narrow gully where the stream crashes down through a narrow slot. It is a 70ft rappel down into this slot and through the vigorous waterfall at the bottom. Another trail hike of about 50yds on the canyon left leads to a wooden canyon-side platform, the start of the third rappel. This drops about 90ft vertically down the canyon-side cliff to the stream bed. You should reach this point at an elevation of 1160ft about 1hr 45min from the start.

From there it is just a few steps to the top of the third rappel, a 30ft descent down a sloping groove with a substantial flow of water. You disconnect from this in a pool that has the wooden platform for the fifth rappel at the far end. This spans the canyon above another roaring slot where you will get pounded by the water at the bottom of this 40ft rappel. It is a fitting climax to an exciting but brief canyon. You should reach the bottom of this last rappel at 1040ft about 2hrs from the start.

From the bottom of this last rappel you hike downstream about 100yds to where the exit trail leaves to switchback up the left wall of the canyon. At one point in a small side canyon a branch trail goes left but you should proceed up the drainage. About 30mins from the last rappel you will reach the canyon rim at 1310ft and proceed along a trail through a field to the Pure Trek exit shelter. A narrow, subsidiary dirt road leads from there back to the main access road about 8min away at 10°26.20'N 84°38.38'W and an elevation of 1310ft. Unguided the whole hike takes about 2.5hrs, probably more when guided.



Map of Piedrita Canyon hike

4.3 Nonequito Canyon

- Hiking time: 5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 3.4 miles
- Elevation gain: 870 feet
- Topo Map: Costa Rica 1:50,000 Topographical Map, #3445-1, Tucurrique
- Difficulties: 5 rappels up to 100ft
- Special equipment: Helmet, harness, rappel device, 200ft rope, 50ft webbing, 5 quicklinks
- Permit: Non-commercial canyon (guide from Explornatura, Turrialba, www.explornaturaCR.com, recommended)
- ACA Rating: 3C III

Characteristics

Nonequito canyon is a non-commercial canyon in the sense that it is in its natural state. However, you probably still need a guide to aid in accessing and exiting the canyon. The Explornatura Adventure company of Turrialba had guided this canyon in the past and may be willing to provide a guide for an experienced group of canyoneers. The canyon features not only a wild and



Left: First rappel in Nonequito Canyon (photo by Lauren Jefferis). Right: Second rappel.

natural tropical canyon but also a spectacular series of rappels beside and in a vigorous river. Though Nonequito means something like “no take away” you will take away some great memories from this adventure.

Trailhead

From Turrialba you take the main highway southeast toward Siquirres and Es-labon for about 8km. Just after the bridge over the Reventazon River, turn right onto road 232 at Angostura and Es-labon and, 2km further, turn right again onto the dirt road 234 toward Atirro. Continue along that dirt road for another 4km past a flooded area on your right and through the hacienda of Atirro, where you make a right turn to cross the bridge. The road now becomes rougher and you proceed through extensive sugar cane fields gradually ascending toward a ridge up ahead. Then, 5km from Atirro, as you near that wooded ridge on your left turn left at a small hacienda (Hacienda Iuray) and follow the mud road as it climbs up the wooded ridge. Just after a small summit you should arrive at the small hamlet of Pejivalle (marked La Veintiseis on the topo map) where you can get some food before or after the adventure. From Pejivalle the road descends again to the river. The trailhead is the bridge over the river about 1km beyond Pejivalle.

Hike

From the bridge/trailhead at 2040ft elevation, follow the farm track alongside the cane fields proceeding upstream on the right side of the river. After crossing



Left: Third rappel. Fourth rappel. Photos by Luca Chiarabini.

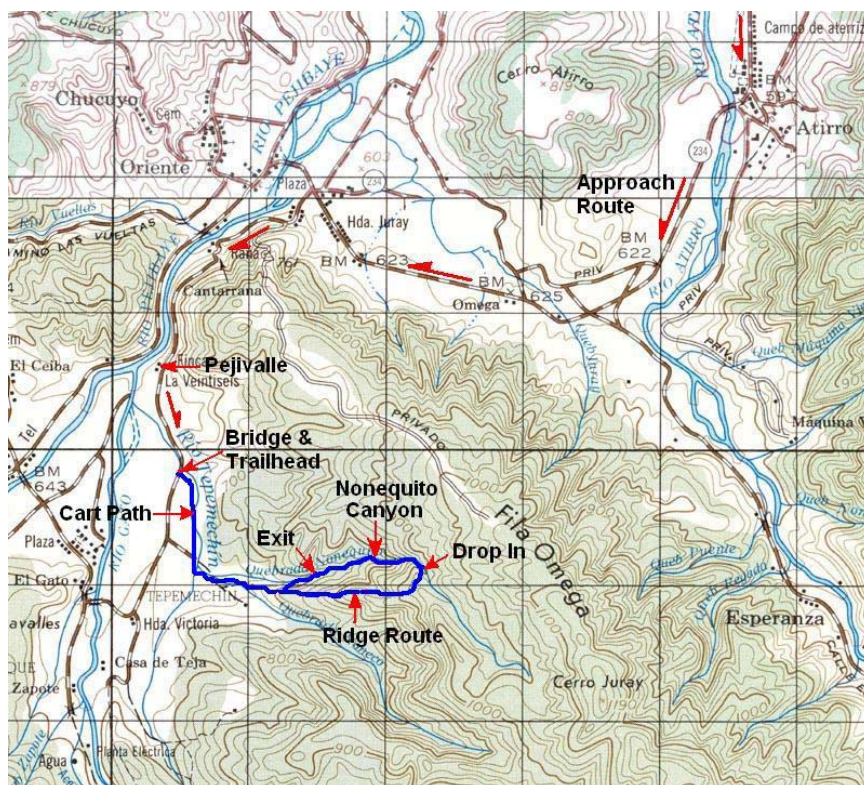
and wading in the river to regain the track, you will come to a fork in the river where you proceed through a gate, cross the right fork (looking upstream) and follow another farm track as it switchbacks up the ridge between the forks. Nonequito River is the fork on your left looking upstream. Follow the farm track as it climbs up the steep ridge until you come to a fence gate where the farm track contours into the Nonequito drainage but a steep and muddy trail continues up the apex of the ridge. Continue up that apex trail as it leaves the developed fields and becomes a trail through the forest. About 1hr 15min from the start at an elevation of 2910ft, you finally come to a summit where the trail almost peters out. Here there is a faint fork but you should proceed ahead down a steep, slippery slope to the Nonequito river about 50ft below. You should reach the stream at an elevation of 2860ft roughly 1hr 20min from the start.

Beginning the descent of Nonequito Canyon you almost immediately come to a shallow slot downclimb where you will need to swim the pool at the bottom. This is followed by the first rappel where the stream drops into a narrow ravine. The anchor is a tree along the ledge on the right and the rappel drops you into a pool for a swimming disconnect. From this first rappel it is only about 100yds to the top of the big series of falls in this canyon. The first section is a downclimb on the left to a platform where you cross to the right and find a bolted anchor in the right wall. You should reach this anchor at an elevation of 2730ft about 2hr 40min after the morning start. The 60ft rappel from this bolted anchor is an exciting challenge. You descend down sloping rock to a groove where the water funnels into a short but vigorous waterfall where you will descend through a brief maelstrom. Downstream of this challenge, is another downclimbable cascade where you should work your way down on the left to another bolted anchor on top of a boulder on the left. You should reach this point at an elevation of 2620ft about 3hrs from the start.

The 50ft rappel from this bolted anchor proceeds down a wide vertical cascade with spray flying all around. At the bottom that "rain" fills the canyon. Just a very short distance downstream is another 50ft rappel, this time from a tree on the left a short way back from the lip. You should reach this point at an elevation of 2570ft about 3hrs 20min from the start. The descent is down through another broad cascade with a series of steep and rough steps. From the bottom of this cascade, proceed along a narrow and somewhat exposed shelf on the left to a recess beside a large tree that can be used to anchor the last rappel. This is a steep 100ft descent of the sidewall of the canyon down into a deep pool. You should reach the bottom of this last rappel (elevation 2420ft) about 4hrs from the start.

From the bottom of this last rappel it is boulder-hopping, stream hike of about 30min to the point where the exit trail leaves the stream. This is on the left just after a nice small plunge pool but is not easy to spot. It would be difficult to find without a guide. You should reach this exit point (elevation 2340ft) about 4hrs 30min from the start. The exit trail roughly follows benches to the left of the river until you come to the start of the farmed area where you veer left to pick up the farm track that you used during the hike in. Once

on that farm track you follow it back to the access route and then back to the trailhead. The total duration of the hike is about 5hrs during which you cover about 3 miles. If you leave the vehicle(s) in Pejivalle it is another 15min hike back to that village.



Map of Nonequito Canyon hike

4.4 Puente Vigas Canyon

- Hiking time: 2 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 0.7 miles
- Elevation gain: 50 feet
- Topo Map: Costa Rica 1:50,000 Topographical Map, #3445-1, Tucurrique
- Difficulties: 6 rappels up to 60ft, 3 zipline traverses
- Special equipment: Helmet, harness, rappel device, two tethers with carabiners (all equipment provided on guided descent)
- Permit: Guided Tour with Explornatura, Turrialba, Costa Rica (www.explornaturaCR.com)
- ACA Rating: 3B I

Characteristics

Many of the adventure companies in Costa Rica offer zip-line canopy adventures. Explornatura offers a combined zip-line and canyoneering descent of Puente Vigas Canyon (translated as Rope Bridge Canyon) just above their warehouse on the outskirts of the town of Turrialba. It features a number of waterfall descents as well as three very exciting and long zip-line transits in the canopy and rappels from the tree perches in which they end.

Trailhead

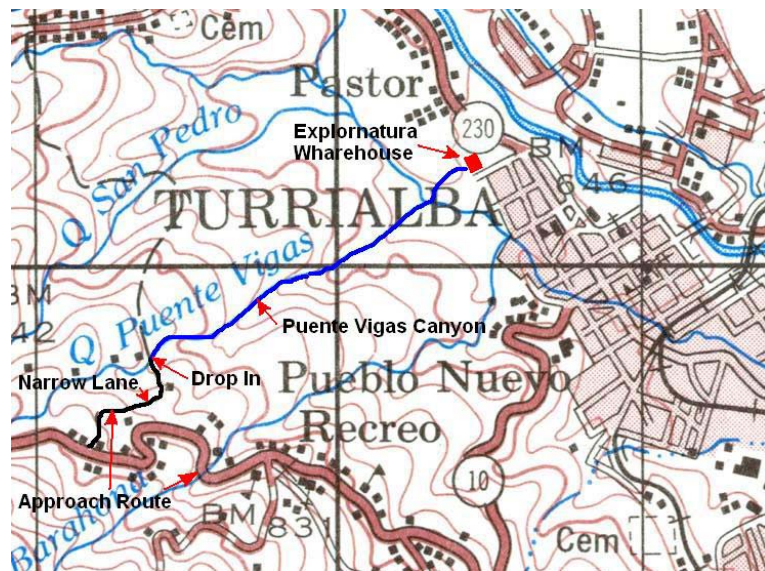


Left: Preparing to zip-line (photo by Luca Chiarabini). Right: Rappeling out of a tree (photo by Lauren Jefferis).

From their warehouse in Turrialba, Explornatura will transport you by bus along side roads and dirt roads to the drop-in point in Puente Vigas Canyon near Calle Chirracá on the outskirts of Turrialba. It is just a few yards from the dirt road to the top of the first rappel at an elevation of 2750ft.

Hike

Just beyond the trail entrance the guides provide rappeling instruction at the top of the first rappel (elevation 2750ft), a straightforward 40ft inclined drop down a broad and shallow waterfall using the large re-bar eye-bolts embedded in the rock as anchor. This ends in a shallow pool and you will then ascend a short trail on the left to the start of the first zip-line, a spectacular 180yds ride across the top of the canopy and across the canyon to a platform high in a large tree. You will then free rappel 60ft from this platform to the ground. This is immediately followed by a 50ft sloping rappel down a waterfall from rebar anchors. Again you ascend to the left to the start of the second zip-line, a 200yds thrill ride across the canopy to another high tree platform. You then rappel down 60ft from the platform to the ground. At the base of the tree a 132ft long rope bridge with substantial exposure crosses over to the left side of the canyon; make sure to clip in your safety tethers to the wire rope handline for this is perhaps the scariest part of the descent. At the end of the bridge hike upstream for a few yards to the top of the third rappel, a 25ft drop down the face of another broad waterfall. Once at the base look for the embedded rebar footholds with which to climb back up on the right side of the falls to a small ledge that is the start of the third zip-line. This whizzes you another 160yds above the canopy to a ground platform on the canyon left. Just below this platform you will come to the last rappel, a 60ft drop down a slippery waterfall face into a knee-deep pool. Here you will get significantly wetter than during the earlier rappels. From the bottom of this last rappel follow the trail on the left up and out of the canyon and then down the hillside to the Explornatura warehouse at an elevation of 2290ft. The whole descent should take about 2hrs.



Map of Explornatura Canyon hike

4.5 Pacuare River

- River-running time: 2 days
- Estimated river distance: 18 miles
- Elevation drop: 800 feet
- Topo Map: Costa Rica 1:50,000 Topographical Maps, #3445-1, Tucurrique, and #3466-11, Bonilla
- Difficulties: Class III and IV rapids, many rapids
- Special equipment: Wetsuit, life jacket, helmet
- Permit: Guided trip with Explornatura Adventure Company of Turrialba

Characteristics

They had been the worst days of my life. Five months earlier my beautiful wife, my lovely Doreen, had been diagnosed with colon cancer. My daughters and I did all we could to explore medical remedies but the faces of the doctors clearly indicated that the cancer had too wide a hold, had spread too far to have left any hope. Better to allow Doreen to take what enjoyment and peace she could from the few days that were left to her. I think she always knew there was little hope. For me there was a jumble of emotions, unbelievable sadness at the prospect of losing the one person to whom I had confessed my whole being, whom I always believed would outlive me. Anger and shame that I had not done more to get her to medical attention much earlier. Panic at what this looming tragedy would mean for my daughters and grandchildren. Helplessness, anguish and a guilt that I should be doing more to enrich her remaining days.

I remember several moments that are seared into my brain. The first moment when she emerged from the doctor's office to tell me she had cancer. I could barely walk to our parked car - yet I cannot imagine what it was like for her. The moment of anger when we realized that our appointment for a CT scan would be delayed due to our own incompetence in making the right appointment. The terrible moment when we were shown the colonoscopy photos with those huge cancerous growths. And yet there were uplifting moments as well. The minutes in the ambulance that was taking her home to die; in her delight, she joked with the ambulance attendants about her almost weightless body. Her comments to her daughters when they lifted her into a sitting position just a couple of days before her death; "Augh, you naughty children ...". But then, finally, the still, cold and lifeless body that no longer looked like her. The zipping up of the body bag as the mortuary attendants took her out of our beloved Sierra Madre home for the last time. And, for the purpose of final identification, my last glimpse of her on the closed circuit TV screen in the mortuary. It was only a little over a month from the colonoscopy to her final breath. So little time to erase that beautiful life force, that inspirational kindness, those fluorescent blue eyes.

My daughters, Dana and Kathy, and I gave her the private farewell that she wanted; each of us spoke at the grave site and spoke from the heart with only her sisters and her best friend present. I knew then that if we were to survive this second tragedy, we could only do so with each other's assistance for only the three of us could know how we felt. But each of us also needed to make our private efforts, Dana and Kathy for the sake of their children and me for the sake of them. I had no idea where or how I could possibly find the strength.

For several weeks, friends came by to ensure that I ate. I went to stay with each of my daughters. I tried to busy myself with matters pertaining to Doreen, making sure all her family and friends knew of the circumstances and her wishes. Trying to decide what to do with all her belongings. Learning how to operate the washing machines. Dismantling the structure that contained several of her cats while she lived. And then, when I made the effort to get away from the house and walk in the mountains, I would scream her name across the canyon walls just to hear it echo back to me as if from the grave. But through all this it was too hard to face my own pain; there seemed no way to rebuild myself for it was almost impossible to imagine any constructive future. Yet a chink of hope for the future came at an unlikely place and time.

A number of months before the cataclysmic diagnosis, I had learned that the American Canyoneering Association and its founder, Rich Carlson, were planning a trip to the canyons of Costa Rica. My tentative plan to attend this "rendezvous" with several of my fellow, southern California canyoneers had been abandoned in the maelstrom of the tragedy and I had not given it a second thought. But about a month after Doreen's death when I had just started to function at some elementary level, two of those friends hatched a scheme to persuade me to go on this trip. Randi Poer called Scott Smith and encouraged him to take me to Costa Rica. They knew I would not go unless one of them was to ask me to accompany them. Scott is such a kind and gentle man that perhaps only he, of all my friends, could have persuaded me to go. I knew he would let me be alone with myself, that he would shield me from unwanted attention, unwelcome sympathy.

So it was that on Sep.1, 2007, with little preparation, I found myself boarding a plane at LAX on my way to San Jose, Costa Rica. Scott had persuaded me that a physical challenge in an unfamiliar but spectacular place would help me find a little distraction even if it could not ease the pain. And that country in Central America is nothing if not spectacular. Costa Rica has a spine of steep mountains and volcanoes covered in dense tropical forest. The rivers and canyons that run through these mountains are magnificent and present very different flora and fauna, a very different visual experience than any in the USA or Europe. Many small companies run guided adventures in this wilderness and we were joining a canyoneering group that had planned a selection of these adventures. We would base our activities in two different locales, spending a few days near La Fortuna in the Arenal Volcano area northwest of San Jose and a few days more in Turrialba southeast of San Jose. In each of these locations, the group had signed up for help from guide services, Pure Trek Canyoning and Desafio in La Fortuna and Explornatura in Turrialba.

We spent the first four days at a ranch outside of La Fortuna, in the shadow of the towering Arenal Volcano. At night a continuous stream of red-hot rock could be seen tumbling down the side of this volcanic cone and lighting up the night sky. During the day the tropical heat and humidity matched the surrounding jungle to create an otherworldly stage to draw my attention away from my grief. With this ranch as base we first descended two nearby commercial canyons, namely Piedra Canyon run by the Desafio adventure company and Piedrita Canyon overseen by Pure Trek Canyoning. The action then shifted to the town of Turrialba, the home base of the Explornatura Adventure Company. There we began with a descent of Puente Vigas Canyon just above Explornatura's warehouse on the outskirts of Turrialba.

Scott had to return home and so I was left on my own before the last adventure; but I figured I should try to stand on my own feet. He had shown a special friendship and I was not going to impose on him beyond the marvelous kindness he had already shown me. This last adventure was to be a two-day descent of the wild Pacuare River, a white water rafting trip through some of the most spectacular and untouched wilderness in Costa Rica. The Pacuare has its source in the Cordillera de Talamanca and flows 108 kilometers to the Caribbean. It leaves the mountains just before the town of Siquierres and downstream of this is of lesser interest. The mountain traverse is a popular venue for white water rafting, kayaking and river boarding; National Geographic named it one of the top 10 river trips in the world, as much for the untouched wilderness as for the whitewater adventure. The rain forests that surround the river are indeed breathtaking, home to exotic species such as panthers, jaguars, ocelots and monkeys. In 1986 a rare black panther was seen about 2 kilometers from the river and jaguars have been spotted near the Haucas River Gorge. Anteaters are common as well as raccoons, river otters, iguanas, Capuchin monkeys, and sloths. Howler monkeys are found on the lower sections after the Dos Montanas canyon. Five species of snakes live in the forest; the poisonous ones include the Coral snake, the Bush Master and the Fer-de-Lance. The Laura and the Sopy Lota (a long black snake that eats poisonous snakes) are also common. The jungle frequently flashes with the bright blue color of the Blue Morpho butterfly, chestnut-mandibled toucans are common and parakeets can sometimes be seen after the Dos Montanas canyon. Other bird inhabitants include herons, hawks, ospreys and vultures. Most of the river corridor through this wilderness is first generation rain forest that has never been touched. It is the traditional home of several groups of indigenous people. The Cabecar Indians live in the forest along the east side of the river. They are small scale subsistence farmers and ranchers, growing bananas and plantains. Although they are known to practice "black magic" they are peaceful and friendly. At one time another tribe, the Burucas Indians, lived on the other, Pacific side of the river.

The first known recreational river descent of the Pacuare was completed by Michael Cane in 1975. Three years later Cane started Costa Rica Expeditions to run commercial trips on the river and in subsequent years other commercial enterprises followed including the Explornatura Adventure Company of Turrialba with whom we were to travel. The heart pounding white water of the Pacuare

along with its remote jungle location and warm water ($65^{\circ}F$) have made it a very popular destination with adventure seekers. The mountain traverse is commonly divided into three parts, the Upper Upper, the Upper and the Lower Sections of which the more technical are the last two. The Upper section ends at Finca La Cruz and consists of about ten miles of class IV and V rapids as well as waterfalls. Our goal was the Lower Section consisting of 18 miles between the put-in at Tres Equis and the town of Siquirres. Over this distance the river drops about 800ft through numerous rapids of class III and IV white water. It starts with a series of class III rapids but the action heats up as the Pacuare enters the Huacas River Gorge where, in addition to many class III, there are two class IV rapids called the Upper and Lower Huacas. Downstream the excitement continues with at least one more class IV called Cimerones. The Lower Section is sometimes descended in one long day but it is more comfortably completed over two days. For these overnight trips, three campsites with lodges and canteens have been established about halfway through the Lower Section. The river is rain fed so it typically runs highest from May to January, the lowest water occurring in March and April. Though it can be rafted all year round, the hurricane season in late summer can produce enough rain in 8 to 10 hours for the river to reach flood stage; it is then unsafe to attempt to run it.

We left Scott at the hotel in Turrialba; it was sad that he had to head home but I knew I needed to become accustomed to fending for myself. The rest of the group and I embarked in a bus for our river Pacuare adventure. From Turrialba we drove north on route 10 to the town of Tres Equis where we turned right onto a rough dirt road at $9^{\circ}57.66'N$ $83^{\circ}34.16'W$ (elevation 2180ft) and began our descent down to the banks of the River Pacuare at $9^{\circ}58.52'N$ $83^{\circ}32.88'W$ and 911ft elevation. There we arrived at a beach where we were given basic instructions on river running and the supplies were packed into the inflatable rafts. I was looking forward to my second significant white water expedition despite my misadventures on the River Kern in California. I hoped that this time I would be able to stay in the boat. There were five rafts each with five or six passengers plus one guide who sat in the back, steered and instructed. My fellow passengers were Jesus "Chewy" Guerrero who had guided us on Mexican canyoneering trips; he was accompanied by his wife. Also, sitting in front of me was Costa Rican Mauricio Odio who was a trained adventure guide. Fellow Californian Lauren Jefferis who sat behind me was a long time acquaintance with whom I had descended many canyons. It promised to be a fantastic adventure among some good friends. Though the river was somewhat swollen by recent rains, the guides had deemed it runnable though a little more exciting than usual.

The sun was shining as we set off from Tres Equis and readily negotiated the first few Class III rapids, appropriately called Bienvenidos (Welcome) and then Pelya Oho (Open Your Eyes). Other class III rapids followed in quick succession as we plunged deeper and deeper into the wilderness. I began to feel some competence and some confidence that I could stay in the boat even though I was somewhat reluctant to stick my feet as deeply as I should into the foothold pockets sown in the floor of the boat for precisely this purpose. My anxiety

was caused by the possibility that an involuntary movement would torque and therefore reinjure one of my oft-damaged knees. But the day was beautiful, the company was delightful and there were moments when I could allow myself to smile. We stopped for lunch at a rocky beach where a magnificent waterfall tumbles down through the jungle into the Pacuare. Like the other meals this was a feast served on the makeshift table formed by turning one of the rafts upside down. After lunch some of us donned our rappeling gear and climbed up into the canyon above the waterfall. There we found a staircase of waterfalls and devised a canyoneering descent that dropped through some of the white water, though we avoided several of the more vigorous hydraulics. After this pleasant diversion we resumed our voyage down the Pacuare, through the Rodeo or Donde rapid and numerous others. Somewhere along this stretch, I had a momentary lapse of concentration while descending a fairly innocent Class III rapid. The boat unexpectedly beached on a midstream rock while I had my back to it and I fell backwards out of the boat into a pool by the side of the river. Though I was quickly hauled back into the boat by my alert fellow crew mates, it was a reminder of my vulnerability to such accidents. However, there was little shock involved and I reclaimed my place with only a slightly damaged ego. The rest of the day was uneventful. We landed in mid-afternoon and made our way up the jungle trail to our overnight campsite. This rustic facility consisted of an array of tents mounted on individual wooden platforms (designed to hold you above the ant-infested jungle floor) and a central canteen and dining area perched on the ridge overlooking a bend in the river. It was a spectacular setting and we all enjoyed an evening of good food prepared by the guides and spiced with lively conversation. The night passed pleasantly with many strange jungle sounds. However, alone in the tent without the need to pay constant attention



The Pacuare River.

to the swirling river, I wept quietly for my lost love.

The second day dawned with another fine meal. Soon the rafts were reloaded and we resumed our white water descent. Almost immediately, we passed Double Drop waterfall on the right side of the river, a signal that we were entering the Huacas River Gorge with a whole series of Class III rapids and two notorious Class IV, the Upper and Lower Huacas. I braced myself for what was to come. Several times we seemed to fly through the air only to plunge down underwater and then be jerked back to the surface. We crashed through Upper Huacas, raising our paddles into the air to celebrate that successful passage. Downstream our still-water passage passed beneath the towering Huacas waterfall that drops vertically over 100ft down a cliff on the right. Then into the roaring white water yet again as we surged through the Class IV Lower Huacas rapid, perhaps the most difficult of the Class IVs because of a tight move against an undercut cliff face. Soon we stopped again for lunch and I began to feel that I could complete the Pacuare adventure without any further mishap. After lunch we entered a lovely quiet section where the river meanders quietly between 100ft cliffs. An old suspension footbridge overhead reminded us of our imminent return to civilization though even that seemed to lack many of its rungs. Most of us slipped into the river to drift along with the rafts in the lovely jungle sunshine. We also took advantage of this quiet section to take lots of photographs, perhaps to remind us of the combination of simplicity and beauty that marked this adventure. Our descent of the Pacuare was almost complete. I felt invigorated and somewhat cleansed.

Downstream of the narrow, graceful gorge the rapids resumed. Upper then Lower Pinball came next with technical moves between numerous rocks. These were followed by Guatemala Rapid as the violence of the white water increased. Ahead lay the last big challenge, the last Class IV, the notorious Cimarones rapid with its huge hydraulics and a great black monolith in center stream that had claimed one life in the year that just passed. Ahead we could see other rafts fly into the air and then plunge out of sight. All seemed to make it, skirting the black monolith through the awesome chute to its right. Then it was our turn. Once we rose into the air and then plunged into the white water. Up we flew again. And again as we raced toward the monolith. Then, just before the chute, we dived again but unfortunately not centered on the hole. I fell backward with the raft and as we crashed into the bottom of the hole, my momentum carried me out of the boat into the thundering maelstrom. The whole misadventure was captured by a series of still photos one of which shows what might have been my last moment, a single leg sticking up out of the water beside the crashing boat. What happened next I simply do not know - except that somehow I hung onto the life line that is strung along the side of the boat - and, somersaulting over this, managed to haul myself back to the side of the boat as we shot down the chute, missing the black monolith by a matter of inches. I do remember not knowing what way was up and struggling to find air and then, riding along the side of the boat as my friends hung onto me, we made it through the rest of the rapid. This time I was badly shaken. And yet, through all that struggle, I remember thinking that it was not time for me to die, that I needed to survive

for many people, some of whom had already suffered too much. It was a genuine epiphany, a moment that would always separate my past from my future. Not that I recognized it at the time for shock held my perspective to a very brief window of the future. If I were a religious man, I might believe that Doreen was telling me something important. If so the message was clear.

There is not much left to tell. Through the mists of my shock I dimly recall the last few Class III rapids: Indian Rapid with its undercut features and many channels on the right hand side but which we sneaked by on the left. Dos Montanas, an “s” curved rapid that feeds right into the steep and



Cimarones Frames 1 and 2.

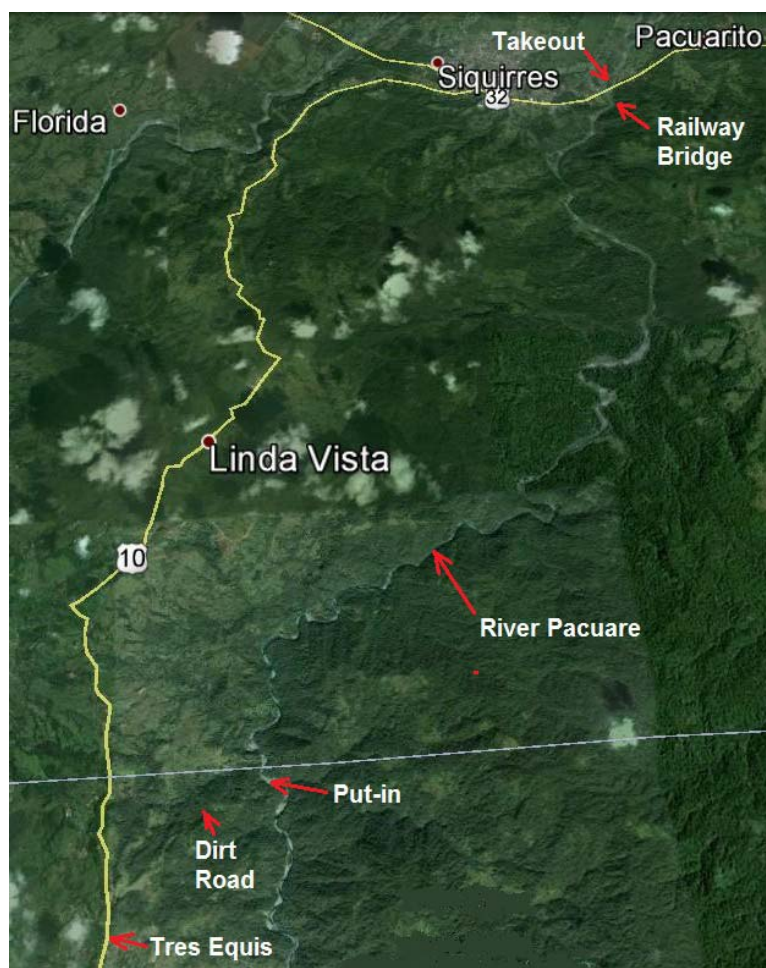


Cimarones Frames 3 and 4.



Cimarones Frames 5 and 6.

narrow canyon by the same name that was at one time going to be the site of a hydropower dam. Then the final rapid known as “Graduation” or “Boats to the Wall”. We passed under a railway bridge at $10^{\circ}5.33'N$ $83^{\circ}29.19'W$, the first sign of civilization in about two days. Just beyond the bridge we landed at Siquirres ($10^{\circ}5.65'N$ $83^{\circ}29.19'W$ and elevation 175ft) and began the long trip home. I was benumbed by what had happened and yet excited about the future. Though a piece of me died several months before and a piece had been exorcised in Cimarones, there was much left to live for and hopefully much left to enjoy.



Map of Pacuare River trip

Chapter 5

JAPAN

This selection of adventures in Japan begins with an ascent of one of that country's most sacred peaks. This followed by the story of my first attempt at a major peak in that country, and by hikes to the summits of four of its tallest mountains.



Adventures in Japan

5.1 Ominesan

- Hiking time: 5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 5 miles
- Elevation gain: 2590 feet
- Topo Map: 1:50,000 Topographical Hiking Map, #56 or Geospatial Authority of Japan Online Map
- Difficulties: Some Class 4 scrambling
- Permit: None required

Characteristics

Mountains have always figured large in the religious and social landscape of Japan. Perhaps this is so because in such a densely populated yet mountainous country where the flatland had all been developed for agriculture, the only wilderness left in which to seek privacy for meditation and prayer was in the mountains. Moreover, it was evident that the mountains brought the rain that was so important to the crops, particularly the rice. So in the ancient shamanistic belief system known as Shinto the mountains were believed to be the home of the spirits and the place where dead souls went to rest. Some mountains are believed to be more sacred than others. Individual religious sects have their own



Left: On the way to Ominesan. Right: Climb near Nishi-no-nozoki.

favorite and most sacred mountains. Adherents of those sects are often required to climb their holy mountains once or twice a year and to perform religious ceremonies during those pilgrimages. These pilgrims signify their devotion by wearing particular clothing and carrying particular objects; they are sometimes referred to as “yamabushi”.

The mountains of the Kii peninsula south of Osaka and Kyoto were a natural refuge from the crowded cities to the north and, after the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century, the principal peaks, and particularly the mysterious peak known as Omimesan or Sanjo-go-take, became invested with much Buddhist symbolism. The most renowned of Japan’s mountain ascetics, En no Ozunu, is said to have climbed Omimesan about 1300 years ago. Later the mountain became the center of the Shugendo sect and was associated with paradise. Even today every member of the sect is expected to go on a pilgrimage to Omimesan once a year. Moreover a strict set of rules were expected to be observed during the pilgrimage, rules that were enforced by local residents including the inhabitants of the local village of Dorogawa at the bottom of one of the pilgrimage trails. Among the rules were the prohibition of food except for that found growing naturally along the way. Moreover, women were not permitted beyond a certain point on the mountain. Those not observing the rules risked being thrown to their deaths from trailside cliffs.

In the early months of 1993, I embarked on an extended academic trip to Japan. One of my longer sojourns was in Osaka with my friend Yoshi Tsujimoto and, one weekend, he decided to take me hiking in the mountains south of Osaka. Our goal was the summit of Sanjo-go-take in the Omimesan region of the Kii peninsula. Early one morning we drove through Wakayama and wound our way over narrow mountain roads to the village of Dorogawa. Driving through Dorogawa on highway 21, we parked at the trailhead at 34°16.013’N 135°54.830’E and an elevation of 3050ft. From there we began our hike to the summit of Omimesan, called Sanjo-go-take. White clad yamabushi were frequently seen starting their pilgrimage up the mountain, festooned with various paraphernalia and making stops for devotions at small “shrines” along the way. The standard outfit was comprised of white and yellow baggy clothes (sometime



Left: Yamabushi praying near Nishi-no-nozoki. Right: Trial of faith by Yamabushi.

deerskins) with white leggings and slippers. They were decorated with colorful beads and pendants and the bells they wore, the staffs they carried, the small drums they played and the chants they performed were presumably intended to attract the attention of the spirits as they walked.

The trail started northeast crossing a stream after about 15 minutes and then turned southeast. About 1.5hr from the start the route steepens as it climbs to a ridge top where, at an elevation of 4900ft, it meets another major trail coming in from the north, a trail that connects the peaks along the spine of these mountains and constitutes the main multi-day devotional route for determined pilgrims. At this trail junction, the trail proceeds through a large corrugated-iron hut that contains various facilities for the yamabushi and other hikers. About 0.3mi further on there was another large “tunnel” hut with more facilities. The yamabushi who collected in and around these huts seemed to act as guides for other pilgrims between here and the summit. Shortly beyond the huts there was a steep but short, class IV rock climb equipped with fixed chains that accessed the ridge that would eventually lead us all the way to the summit. Close by, at a place called Nishi-no-nozoki, was a precipice where we observed yamabushi dangling young pilgrims head-first over the edge so that they would confess their sins and could proceed, cleansed, to the summit of this sacred mountain. Just beyond this the trail proceeded through a narrow gap in the rocks that symbolized passage through the womb to a new beginning. Beyond this the trail was lined with stone-carved devotional (funeral?) decorations as we approached the summit. A large wooden gate announced our arrival and various wooden temples and other buildings adorned the summit at 34°15.188’N 135°56.470’E and an elevation of 5640ft. The number of yamabushi at or near the summit as well as the extensive ornamentation made this perhaps the most active pilgrimage site that I had encountered in Japan. Few foreigners visit this place and so I was observed with curiosity.

The main, multi-day pilgrimage trail proceeds on beyond the summit of Sanjo-go-take to a series of peaks to the south and west. However, after a brief rest and time for admiring the view from the summit, we turned back the way we came. Several trails drop down to the village of Dorogawa and we chose



Left: Yoshi approaches the summit. Right: Sign at trail junction just below the summit.

Apparently this is the only mountain in Japan where today women are banned from hiking to the summit. The area around Sanjo-go-take which is off-limits for women is apparently about 2 miles in radius and those that defy that restriction have, at least in the past, risked the wrath of Shugendo practitioners known to resort to some ancient methods of punishment. It seems extraordinary that such medieval practices should continue to exist in a modern country like Japan but then western religions also preserve many discriminatory traditions.

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5.2 Kurodake

- Hiking time: 4 hours without snow
- Estimated hiking distance: 3.8 miles
- Elevation gain: 1330 feet
- Topo Map: Geospatial Authority of Japan Online Maps
- Difficulties: Possible snow fields
- Special equipment: Crampons and ice axe
- Permit: Sign in at trailhead

Characteristics

Most hikers have an unwritten list of mountains that they would like to climb. And Mount Fuji is on many of those lists because of the hallowed place it occupies in the Japanese culture and mythology. The Japanese regard the symmetry of its nearly perfect conical shape as implying a sacred origin and the number of paintings, view points and photographs that celebrate views of Fuji are numberless. Yet this same monotonous symmetry makes the hike up Mount Fuji somewhat boring. The Japanese have a saying that everyone should climb Fuji once but only a fool would climb it twice. What makes the hike even less enjoyable is that, for the few summer months when the snow is gone, there is an almost unbroken queue of people trudging up to the summit.

Yet, despite all this, when I went to Japan for a couple of months in the spring of 1993, one of my private objectives was to get to the top of Fuji-san. When I mentioned this plan in a letter to my principal host, Professor Akira



Left: Shirotake peninsula. Right: Kurodake.

Shima of Tohoku University, he replied that this would not be possible because “Mt. Fuji is closed”. It seems that the Japanese, who love rules and usually obey them without question, had long ago established “a season” for climbing Fuji that begins on July 1. I, being singularly unimpressed by arbitrary rules, still thought I might be able to sneak away some weekend and attempt the climb. It seems, however, that my reputation had preceded me for it became clear that Shima and my other hosts had arranged a schedule that did not have the two successive free days that would be necessary for the attempt. And so my ambitions were thwarted. Of course, it must also be added that during the month of April when I would be within striking distance of the mountain, the depth of snow and the severity of the weather make it foolish for anyone to attempt the climb and particularly foolhardy to try to do it alone. Nevertheless, I felt some sense of frustration especially since I had come well-equipped for the snow. Early the previous winter I had purchased crampons (spiked frames you strap to your boots) and had practiced snow climbing with them on the slopes of Mount Baldy in California.

During the first month and a half of my stay in Japan I did have the opportunity to climb a number of mountains in central and southern Japan. Almost always some fellow academic accompanied me. Thus I climbed To-no-dake (4892ft) in Tanzawa Quasi-National Park with my friend, Yoichiro Matsumoto, of Tokyo University. And with another friend, Yoshi Tsujimoto of Osaka University, I climbed two very interesting and very different mountains. One day during “Golden Week” we drove to the village of Dorogawa in the wilderness area south of Osaka and climbed the sacred mountain of Sanjo-go-take (5640ft) also commonly known as Omine-san. Later, during a visit to the beautiful island of Yakushima south of Kyushu, we negotiated our way past a large group of Japanese macaques and through fantastic semi-tropical forest and meadows with crystal streams on our way to the magnificent 6007ft summit known as Kuromi-dake. These climbs were very enjoyable and interesting but not exceptionally challenging. I still harbored a desire to climb a really challenging mountain, to escape from my chaperones and, perhaps, to demonstrate that I could have climbed Fuji anyway if I had been given a chance. Call it Irish stubbornness.



Left: Sounkyo from above. Right: Kurodake.

Trailhead

In late May, I traveled to the relatively remote northern island of Hokkaido. Because of the severity of the winters this island was only settled about 150 years ago by the Japanese or “Yamoto” who displaced the native inhabitants known as the Ainu. The island is still sparsely populated and that population is almost entirely confined to the flat valleys between the snow-covered mountain ranges. Consequently the government has been able to set aside large sections of the most beautiful mountains as National Parks. Moreover, the people of Hokkaido, descendants of frontiersmen, have a better developed sense of personal liberties. As a result I was allowed to travel to the outback on my own to visit the largest national park in Japan, the rugged wilderness known as Daisetsu-zan National Park. Specifically, I traveled first by train and then by bus to a small mountain village called Sounkyo that lies in a deep gorge in Daisetsuzan National Park. High above the rim of the gorge is a range of towering, snow-covered peaks and the most dramatic of these is the spectacular 6509ft peak known as Kurodake or “the black peak”. The name was clearly motivated by the basalt cliffs that surround three sides of the summit and stand out in stark contrast to the snow-field on the fourth side.

In its shape, Kurodake is often likened to the Matterhorn though, in all honesty, it is much less steep than that fabled alpine landmark. Kurodake and the other peaks of this range are inaccessible except for a brief period in the late summer when the snow dwindles to patches. Then, when most of the snow has melted, Kurodake is easy to climb. But in late May it is very clear that to all intents and purposes “Mt. Kurodake is closed”.

However, no one was there to stop me. Moreover, in an effort to draw tourists to this remote place, the local authorities had very recently constructed a cable car that climbs from Sounkyo up to the rim of the gorge and provides a substantial start in climbing Kurodake.

Hike

Early in the morning, I took the first cable car to the top station and sneaked off onto the surrounding snow field. No one kept any special watch for no one would dream of doing such a thing since “Mt. Kurodake was closed”. After about a quarter of a mile I was out of sight of the top station and turned toward the mountain. The first hour and a half of the climb was fairly straightforward. My crampons made climbing in the snow quite easy and I made steady progress up the snow field that led toward the summit. But toward the end of the second hour, the slope began to get quite steep. I progressed by digging in the toe spikes of my crampons and using my gloved hands to maintain my stance. Only occasionally did I encounter snow into which I sank to my waist. But as I neared the summit, the snow began to get very deep and the mist began to thicken. I began to fear an inadvertent encounter with the edge of the black cliffs. Eventually, despite my stubbornness, I had to conclude that it was too dangerous to continue. Though I felt that the summit might be only a few yards

further, it would have been extremely foolhardy to continue. And so I turned around.

It was only then that I realized the true precariousness of my position. Climbing a steep, snow-covered slope is one matter. Trying to descend is quite another matter entirely. It was much more difficult to secure a firm foothold when descending than when ascending. I barely inched my way down the slope. There were several moments when only the slimmest margin separated me from a life-threatening slide down the mountain. And it took many minutes to recover my nerve after those moments. I would breathe very deeply to regain my composure and then take another small step. It also occurred to me that I definitely did not want to die on that mountain and that I very much wanted to see my wife and children again. Eventually, I made it to the lower slopes where I could have confidence in my ability to stop any slide. Then I made rapid progress walking down the snow field, retracing my steps in the snow. The hours of daylight were rapidly dwindling as I sneaked back into the cable car station. I half-expected an official “unwelcoming” reception party. But no one seemed to have noted my long absence and I caught the last descending cable car to the base station.

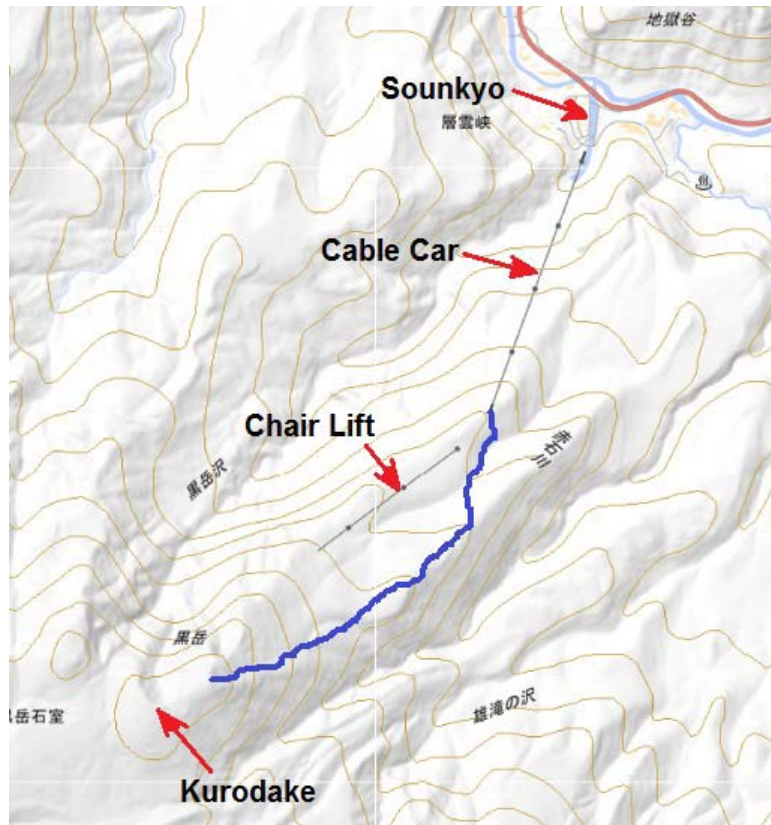
An odd sort of euphoria came over me once I reached the safety of the cable car. Perhaps it was the oft-described, heightened appreciation of life that seems to follow any brush with death. Perhaps the accumulated adrenalin provides a natural narcotic. I know I thought especially of Doreen and my children. And, for the moment, I lost that sense of purpose that usually governs my travels. At the base station, I lingered somewhat aimlessly amid the souvenir stands. It occurred to me that I had bought very little for my wife and children. Yet, like most souvenir stands, there was little here that was worth buying and I would normally have passed straight on. But, for reasons I still do not fully understand, my attention was transfixed by one particular object, a bright pink baseball cap proclaiming “Hokkaido”. Acting on impulse, I bought this garish hat, imagining that I would give it to my eldest daughter. Perhaps it was that the cap reflected the fluorescence of my life at that moment.

And so I still had not overcome the kind of challenge I had sought. I had failed to climb Mt. Kurodake; I had discovered that indeed “Mt. Kurodake was closed”. And yet I now understood why I felt such resentment when I heard that phrase. Mountains are wild and free and dangerous and beautiful. They are never conquered; one merely trespasses upon them for a brief moment in time. For anyone to arbitrarily declare that a mountain is closed seemed an insult to that spirit and to its reflection in my soul. I felt some measure of satisfaction that I was stopped by my own frailty and not by some arbitrary rule. Some measure of joy for having experienced the wild beauty of that mountain at that particular moment in time. And some measure of pride that the moment was mine alone.

Moreover, I was to find out just how close I did, in fact, come to conquering Kurodake. I stayed the night in Sounkyo and the next morning dawned bright and beautiful, sunny and clear. I had a couple of hours before my bus left and so I decided to ride the cable car again in order to take some photographs of

Kurodake from that vantage point. I was rewarded with a magnificent view from the observation deck on the roof of the top station. Kurodake and the other neighboring peaks rose majestically above me, shining in the morning sun. The observation deck was also equipped with the standard telescopes one often finds in such locations and so I idly focussed one of these on the summit of Kurodake. And there, clear as day, were my tracks in the snow in the otherwise pristine snow field. They led directly up toward the summit and came to a halt only a few yards from the peak. Though I did not know it at the time, a small effort would have placed me at the top. There were no other tracks in the snow near the summit. Clearly I had been the first person to attempt to climb Kurodake that year.

Someday I will return to Japan during late July or August. I will catch the bus from Tokyo to the Fifth Station more than half-way up Fuji and I will follow hundreds of others as they make their way up the well-worn trail to the summit of that symbolic mountain. Maybe, like many others, I will climb in the dark in order to enjoy the beauty of the sunrise. No doubt I shall feel some sense of accomplishment. But it will not come close to the raw power of my experience on Kurodake and my elation at seeing my footprints reach toward the summit of that mountain. Perhaps I am crazy.



Map of Kurodake hike

5.3 Fuji

- Hiking time: 8 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 7.5 miles
- Elevation gain: 4530 feet
- Topo Map: Topographical hiking map #31 or Geospatial Authority of Japan Online Map
- Permit: None required

And so it was that, some four years later, I took a taxi to the Kyoto Central Station and was soon speeding along at close to 160mph on the shinkansen bound for Fuji City, about 200 miles to the east. The Kodama or limited express (for Japanese trains of various degrees of expressness are given useful identifiers) arrived exactly on time at 10.52am at Shin-Fuji station. There I was met by my friend Yoshi Tsujimoto and one of his students, Masayuki Tanada, who had promised to carry both of us oldies to the summit of Fuji. Or so we teased him; in reality he was the very essence of quiet civility.

Trailhead

From Shin-Fuji station it is an increasingly tortuous drive of some two hours through the town of Fujinomiya and up the lower slopes of Mount Fuji. You start in the typically dense built-up area around Fuji City and Fujinomiya and rise gently through crowded, rolling farmland. Soon, however, this gives way to dense semi-tropical Japanese forest of low trees and a thick ground-covering of bamboo. Higher up this forest begins to change with increasing numbers of larger pine trees and a thinning of the bamboo. Eventually the bamboo disappears completely to leave an attractive highland forest of firs.

Our goal was the highest point reachable by road on the south side of Fuji, namely the mountain station of Shin-go-gome (“new fifth station”), high on the steep sides of the great volcano. By way of background, know that Fuji is a



Left: On the slopes of Fuji. Right: Hachigome Lodge.

sacred mountain topped by a shrine. Pilgrims who begin at the base of the mountain are aided by ten stations roughly equidistant along the climb to the top. There are several routes up the mountain each with its own chain of ten stations. However, these days most hikers with a less devotional objective, drive as far as they can up the mountain. Roads on the north side and on the south side climb to just over 7500ft where the fifth station, Go-gome, is located. The most popular route is up the Kawaguchi-ko trail from the Go-gome trailhead (7592ft) on the north side of the mountain. We followed the Fujinomiya trail that begins at Shin-go-gome (7874ft), the new fifth station, on the south side.

Hike

It was mid-afternoon before we reached the large parking area at Shin-go-gome and managed, somewhat fortuitously, to find a parking space. The weather had been very cloudy and misty as we drove up to this point and we had resigned ourselves to very limited visibility during the climb. But, as we readied our equipment in the parking lot, we began to catch glimpses of blue sky and sunshine above us. Buoyed in spirit we began our climb upwards from the crowded fifth station at about 2.00pm. It is only a short way to the sixth station, Roku-gome, the intervals between stations being quite irregular in places. The sixth station also coincides with the tree line so that the terrain from here on was everywhere volcanic rock strewn with ash and geologically recent ejecta. We made steady progress up the rough and worn trail. Soon we were in bright sunshine with an uninterrupted carpet of clouds below us. The famously regular shape of Fuji was evident as the sun cast its shadow on the parchment of the



Left: Inside Hachigome Lodge. Right: Sunrise.

top of the clouds. But the bright sun also meant that we were soon sweltering in the heat. We could see Shichi-gome, the seventh station, above us and it seemed deceptively close. But it took a depressingly long time to get there and we were struggling when we arrived at 10,000ft and Shichi-gome about 4.00pm.

Our plan was to climb some distance during the daylight hours and then to find a place to stay the night so that we could climb the last part before dawn the next day. In doing so we would be following the traditional timetable for climbing Mount Fuji. The idea is to reach the summit in time to enjoy what the Japanese call “goraiko”, the semi-mystical experience of viewing the sunrise from the summit.

In theory it is possible to stay overnight in one of the many lodges on the mountain; almost all the stations have such a lodge. They consist of three or even four levels of shelves installed in a moderate, single storey hut. Hundreds of hikers are packed in like sardines on these shelves equipped with heavy cover-blankets. As we were climbing toward Shichi-gome, we heard word that many of the lodges were closing or had already closed for the winter. Shichi-gome lodge still seemed open for business. But it was very small, already crowded and a very long way from the summit for a pre-dawn hike. We decided to risk our chances further up the mountain since we still had a couple of hours of daylight.

And so we pressed on. It was harder going now, both rougher and steeper. We had to pause quite often to get our breath in the rarefied air and so, though the large eighth station did not seem very high above us, it took a long time to reach it. At one rest stop, we had confirmation of the rumors we had heard further down the mountain. The lodge at the eighth station, Hachi-gome, was full; the proprietor could not pack another single soul into his establishment. This was depressing since we also had confirmation that all the higher lodges (mainly those on the summit) were closed for the season. But almost immediately, we had some more encouraging news. Apparently, there was another Hachi-gome lodge just a short distance around the mountain. This was on one of the other, less popular trails; apparently it was still open and even had some space left for



Left: On summit of Fujisan. Right: Summit and crater of Fuji.

the night. And so we pressed on in a somewhat more encouraged mood. Light was already beginning to fade as we reached the large and full Hachi-gome lodge and trudged past onto the cross-mountain trail that would take us about a half-mile to the east. There, at 11,150ft, we found the other Hachigome and, with great relief, purchased three of the last available spaces. The fact that the cost was a highly inflated \$60 per person seemed of little consequence compared to the alternative.

And so we checked in to the Akaiwa Hachigome or “Eighth Stage Red Rock Lodge”. In its literature it advertises itself in these lyrical terms:

*You can be relaxed since it is not crowded.
You can enjoy the best sunrise from the room.
You can climb faster since the Gotemba trail is less crowded.
You can have as much curry and rice as you want for dinner.
Please enjoy wonderful Fuji with us. We are waiting for you.*

though, of course, in Japanese, not in English. A few of the other inmates, spoke a little English, but otherwise I had to rely almost exclusively on my friend Yoshi.

As in all Japanese dwellings, we took off our shoes in the entrance way, in this case a small, sunken open space inside the doorway. Then, in our stocking feet, we stepped up onto the lowest of the carpeted platforms. The last few spaces that we had felt fortunate to claim were on the third and highest platform, with just about three feet of headroom below the wooden roof. To reach our precious space, it was necessary to climb up onto the second platform, carefully choosing our footing to avoid stepping on sleeping bodies and then to crawl over more bodies to the roughly 6ft by 2ft space that each of us had been allotted. But it was warm, comfortable and clean. And there was a sense of camaraderie and of shared adventure that made the atmosphere friendly and hospitable.

After stowing our belongings, we climbed down again to enjoy the evening meal of curry and rice, prepared in two great iron pots bubbling over the stove in the sunken hallway. We washed it down with cups of hot tea and it tasted marvelous after our exertions of the day. Crowded around the three small and low tables set up to serve as a temporary eating area, conversation was inevitable. We met the three young Tokyo women who got the very last places just after us and beside whom we would spend the night. I also had a publicly entertaining conversation with a very old Japanese woman who had somehow managed to climb this far despite her arthritis and her bent frame. Later Yoshi related to me what he remembered of the banter over the dinner table. The old lady was from Tokyo and was climbing Fuji to visit a temple in which the mummy of a monk is kept (unfortunately that temple was closed). She was also a vegetarian and claimed that all the confusion in today’s Japan came from eating meat. She was the soul of the party and, since I was the first foreigner she had ever talked with, she had a number of observations on me and on the circumstances in which the crowd found great amusement. Though her wry comments were lost on me, I felt I knew her thoughts when she asked for my

hand and gently stroked it. In that quite public moment, I had a strange sense of quiet humanity and peaceful compassion. Seconds later the feeling was gone and the amiable chatter resumed. Later, when the conversation ebbed, we retired to our assigned spaces on the shelves to try and get some sleep before our early morning start. But just before the room lights were extinguished, I was moved to glance down to where the old lady was sleeping by the door. There she lay curled up without mattress pad, bed cover or head rest.

We arose about 4.00am and made preparations for a pre-dawn departure. During our brief sleep, I and others had been awakened by the obvious distress of one of the other guests. He was having difficulty breathing and even the oxygen bottle that his friends had brought did not help very much. Eventually, the whole group dressed and left in order to get this man back down the mountain to medical attention. It was dramatic testimony to the effects that altitude (in this case 11,150ft) can have on some people. As we were rising, we discovered that Yoshi was also feeling some of the effects of the altitude including headache and nausea. He decided to remain in the lodge while Tanada and I went to the summit. It was cold and dark as we set out, now following the Gotemba trail. Most of the other guests had a similar plan; while a few left before us, most followed and, looking back, we could see a twinkling line of flashlights wending its way up the mountain. The trail is well traveled and therefore not difficult to follow in the dark; the main problem is the rough and loose footing that can cause an occasional stumble in the dark. It took about 1hr for us to reach the torii gate that marks one's arrival at the crater rim at about 12,000ft. It was lightening fast and so, along with crowds of others, we found a good vantage point from which to await the 6.00am sunrise. And it was quite spectacular though too cold to stand and watch for long. Soon, we were off again, hiking around toward the west side of the crater rim aiming for the 12,385ft summit of Mount Fuji. Unfortunately, a most unsightly weather station has been built right on top of the summit; this is not only an eyesore but it also spoils that rich excitement normally experienced in reaching a raw, high peak. Nevertheless, it was a moment of accomplishment for I had been through many adventures since I first dreamed of climbing Mount Fuji. There seemed a rightness to the moment and a sense of completion, of closure. There would be other dreams and other trials but they would be part of later chapters.

In the annals of the vulcanologists, Fuji is a young volcano whose oldest lava is only 8000 years old. It has been dormant for almost 300 years, the last eruption in 1707 occurring not in the impressive summit crater but much lower down on the southeast side of the mountain. This eruption produced a still-recognizable crater and a side cone known as Hoei-san that we would later pass during our descent. Though dormant recently, Fuji has been very active during the historical period; for example, 18 eruptions were recorded during the period from 781AD to 1707AD. Despite its recent inactivity, the crater at the summit is still an impressive 300ft deep and almost half-a-mile across. Its interior walls are almost everywhere vertical and are highlighted by slashes of the stark volcanic colors, red, yellow and black.

There are other, less obnoxious buildings on the summit. The ancients clearly had a more refined sense for they built their shrine in a discreet and unobtrusive site on the rim opposite the summit. Indeed, the Japanese records tell of pilgrimages being made to the summit over a thousand years ago. The earliest recorded ascent was in the 870s and shrines were built near the summit in the 1100s. Today the Sengen shrine, where the cherry blossom is worshiped, is a most ecumenical establishment, tending to the needs of climbers from all around the world. Established climbing routes to the summit were first created by monks of the Shugendo sect. Initially, the most popular route was the one that we followed; it starts far below at a shrine in Fujinomiya. The stations and lodges appeared about 1430, first on the Fujinomiya trail and later, in the 1600s, on the most popular route today, namely that on the north side. Until about 100 years ago, only monks and priests climbed Fuji; indeed women were forbidden to do so until 1872. Now, during the official, open season in July and August nearly 200,000 people set off for the summit. On busy weekends, this can mean an almost continuous queue of people on the most popular trails.

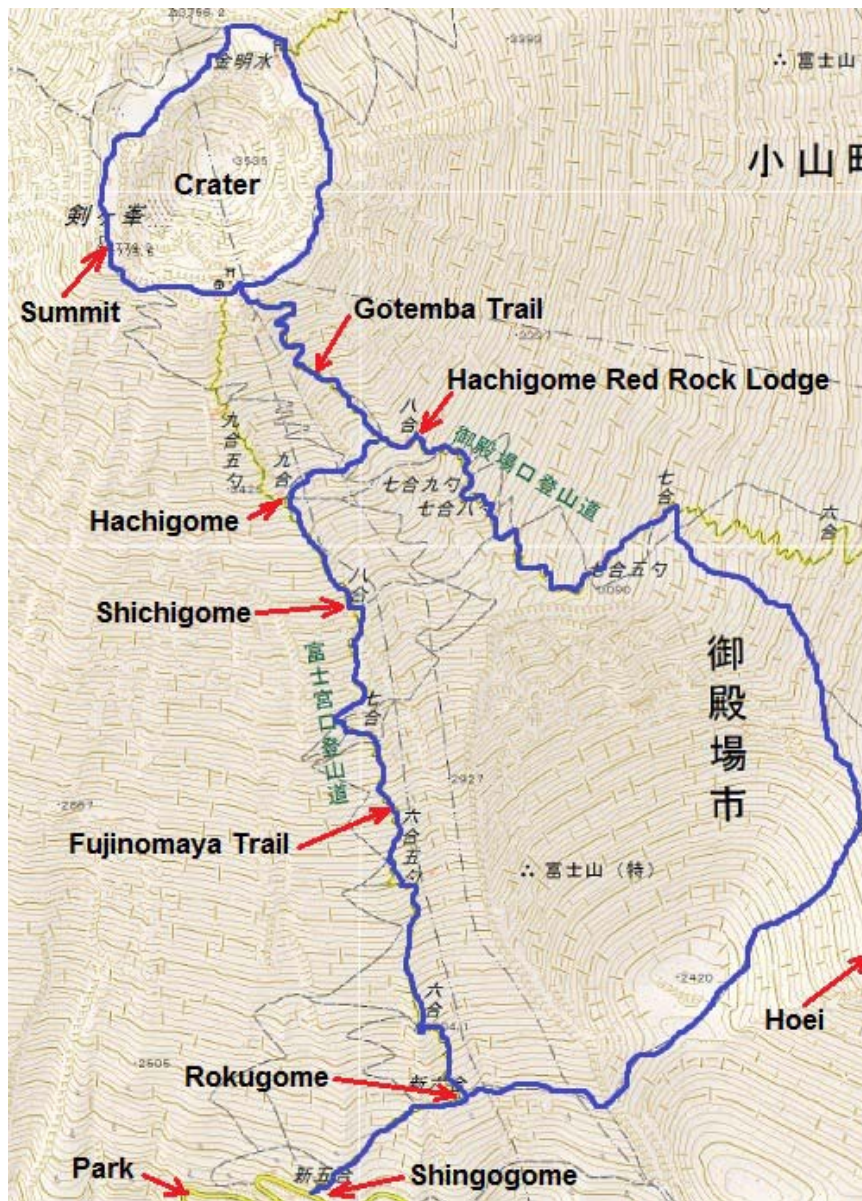
One of the popular rituals is to purchase a wooden staff or "kongozue" and have it branded with the name of each station that you visit. All of the stations feature a brazier and branding irons for this purpose. A long queue of people were waiting at the Sengen Shrine on the summit for that particularly sought-after brand. Despite the queue, the shrine is a dignified and busy place; only the NTT telephone is incongruous.

After circling the crater, we began our descent and made rapid progress down the Gotemba trail by which we had ascended in the pre-dawn hour. Only one incident of note occurred. About 500ft above the Akaiwa Hachi-gome lodge, we encountered the last of the previous night's guests, making very slow but steady progress up the mountain. It was the old lady using two canes to aid her balance on the rough trail. She seemed oblivious to our approach, intent on the effort required to labor up the steep slope in the morning sun. I thought for a moment of breaking into that reverie, but then realized I could not communicate with her at all without Yoshi. And so I just stood to the side as she inched her way slowly and silently by. No special feeling accompanied that moment, only a sense of loneliness and sadness. I stood wondering why she was so determined on climbing Fuji and on doing so alone. In her traditional Japanese clothes and thongs, she seemed to be from a different age and place than the middle-aged, affluent and meticulously-equipped women who were part of many of the groups of hikers we encountered. I still think of that old woman, wishing that I had made more of an effort to understand her, her unquenchable spirit and the feelings she invoked in me.

Back at the Hachi-gome lodge we found Yoshi much revived. This very day the lodge was closing for the season and the owners were busy packing their equipment and installing the shutters that would protect it from the winter storms. After breakfast, we resumed our descent, having decided to take a different route over this last leg. Thus we hiked down to the Shichi-gome lodge on the Gotemba trail and there forked right to circle the Hoei-san crater, now on our right. For the next couple of miles, the steep trail is composed of deep

and loose sand/gravel known as “sunabashiri”. This allows for a quite novel and rapid mode of descent, a cross between skiing and running, in which one can safely take large sliding steps much as one would on a sand-dune. It also provides fascinating views of the Hoei-san crater itself and its interesting combination of vertical striations of solid rock and slopes of sunabashiri. We kept to the right fork at each trail junction and circled down along the inside of the crater, eventually arriving at its base. From here it was a short hike along the cross-mountain trail back to Shin-go-gome and the car. Without much delay, we packed up and drove down the mountain to the Shin-Fuji station where I caught the shinkansen bound for Tokyo and Yoshi and Tanada began the long drive back to Osaka.

As I had imagined, it had not been a particularly difficult or scenic hike. Rather it had been an intriguing cultural experience, highlighted by my brief encounter with an old lady from a very different time and culture. In the days that followed I retained an eerie memory of that encounter and yearned to know what happened to her on the slopes of Fuji. I fervently hope she made it down safely.



Map of Fuji hike

5.4 Kitadake

- Hiking time: 12 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 10 miles
- Elevation gain: 5523 feet
- Topo Map: Japan 1:40,000 Topographical Map #43 or Geospatial Authority of Japan Online Map
- Permit: None required

Characteristics

Though I cannot recall exactly when I first met Yoichiro Matsumoto, I do know I recognized early that this was a very accomplished but very private man who had taught himself to interact with the world despite a natural reluctance to do so. Perhaps because of his diminutive stature he possessed an intense drive for perfection and a compulsive determination to succeed, I suspect not for the recognition it would bring but rather for the security of controlling his environment. This is a story about Yoi and about myself and the elemental way in which relationships can undergo transformations in the face of adversity. The stage on which the play took place was the second highest mountain in Japan. Much less well known than the taller Fuji, Kitadake (translated “North Peak”) in the Southern Alps of Japan is much steeper and more demanding than its larger sister. The 10474ft summit (the highest non-volcanic peak in Japan) sees only serious mountaineers and far fewer visitors than crowd the summit of Fuji.



On the summit of Kitadake.

Yoi and I had become professional friends during years of attending the same academic symposia and conferences. We had worked in overlapping areas of scientific research and so developed the respectful relationship that naturally derives from the mix of cooperation and rivalry inherent in such a scientific community. His work was (and is) characterized by considerable insight into physical principles combined with great mathematical agility but most of all by Herculean effort and intense drive. Moreover, in the international business of scientific research, it is essential to acquire more than proficient skill at the English language both in verbal and in written communications. Yoi's natural shyness was a drawback in this respect, but he had through great effort develop excellent verbal and writing skills. He was also meticulous in the way in which he dressed. And so the impression that this well-dressed, well-spoken, and supremely composed little man would exude was the epitome of elegance. At the same time the body language said "private - stay your distance". Some of this was, of course, a part of his Japanese culture; but there was also a compulsive self-protection mechanism at work. I developed considerable respect for Yoi and his work and called him a friend. He had been very kind to me during a number of visits to Japan and I had spent many enjoyable days at his institution, the University of Tokyo. We had even day-hiked together in Tanzawa Quasi-National Park. However it was not possible for me to claim I had ever seen beneath his shell.

In the summer of 1999, I was once again bound for Japan to visit several universities, to present a number of scientific talks and to revisit old friends. I had a free weekend and Yoi had volunteered to arrange a weekend hike for me since my predilection for such activity was now well known among my professional friends. It was rumored that several of his students would be accompanying us and that we would be climbing Kitadake. I did not pay too much attention to the plan since, knowing Yoi's perfectionism, I was sure that the arrangements would be precise and meticulous. But I did come well-equipped with my own hiking gear and so was prepared for almost all eventualities when Yoi and I got together on the afternoon of Friday, July 2, 1999, on the campus of Tokyo University. There I also met the other two hikers, a graduate student of Yoi's by the name of Nobuhiro Yamanishi and a former student called Toshiyuki Hasegawa. I had met Yamanishi several years previously; he had spent some years during his youth living in San Francisco and so spoke excellent English.

Trailhead

In the late afternoon, we loaded all our gear into Hasegawa's new station wagon and set off for the South Alps. On the super highway leading out of Tokyo and amid the hectic Friday afternoon traffic, the conversation naturally turned to Kitadake, the mountain ahead of us. From past conversations, I knew that Matsumoto had been a very active and determined mountaineer in his youth. I had also heard brief reference to a major accident he had experienced in those days. I now learned that the accident had occurred on the slopes of Kitadake. Yoi had been close to the summit of Kitadake when he had fallen nearly 100ft

down a steep rocky slope, severely injuring himself. His fellow climbers had sought help from the mountain hut (“Katano-koya”) not far away at the 10000ft level and Yoi had been stretchered back to that hut. Fortunately it was equipped with a telephone that was used to contact Yoi’s father. By pulling some special strings within the Japanese military, the senior Matsumoto arranged a helicopter evacuation for his son. The helicopter landed on a narrow platform beside the mountain hut and carried Yoi to much needed medical attention. Now, in the darkness of the back of Hasegawa’s car, I got the impression that Yoi had unfinished business with Kitadake.

We drove due east, pausing for dinner in a roadside restaurant and then pressed on in the summer darkness. Leaving the super highway at Kofu, a short drive on surface streets brought us to the base of the precipitous South Alps and we began to climb up a steep shallow valley. The tortuous road passed several resorts before arriving at our destination, a traditional Japanese ryokan and hot springs resort known as the “South Alps Hot Springs Onsen Hotel” (“Ashiyasu Onsen”). After check in we deposited our gear in our tatami room before seeking out the onsen or hot springs. It is a Japanese tradition that I now thoroughly enjoy. Then we laid out our bedding and went to sleep.

Hike

We rose at 3.00am for Yoi had determined on a very early start for reasons that were never completely clear to me. We arranged our gear and packed our backpacks preparing for a two day hike. Then we took to the road in darkness, continuing up the narrow winding road as it switchbacked on up the steep and shallow valley. I learned later that this well-known scenic route is called the South Alps Super Rindo Road. As it neared the ridge-top it proceeded through a very narrow, misty tunnel and emerged into the next valley - the Norogawa valley, a larger but equally precipitous gorge. The road continued north high on the east side of this gorge, winding tortuously in and out of side gorges and plunging frequently into narrow tunnels. Proceeding upstream, the road eventually reached the main river and its terminus at the small resort of Hirogawara or Hirokawara (“Wide River Place”) at an elevation of 4985ft. We parked near a small inn and, because of the rain, prepared our breakfast in the shelter of its porch.

As we were making our way from the overnight hotel to Hirogawara, it became clear to me that my hosts (and in particular, Yoi Matsumoto) were quite concerned that the rain that had already begun and that was forecast to continue over the weekend would force the authorities to close the Super Rindo Road. In fact we had passed the open gate on the road near the top of the first steep valley. And so the fear of not reaching Hirogawara had passed. However, it was now replaced by the fear that the road would be closed when we returned from our hike on Sunday afternoon. I soon realized that the consequences of the road closing were beginning to prey on Yoi’s mind. On Monday, I was scheduled to give an important lecture at another university in Tokyo and if Yoi’s arrangements were to cause me to fail to show up for that engagement he

would suffer considerable embarrassment and “loss of face”. Each time it began to rain harder I could see additional anguish pass across his face.

After breakfast (about 5.15am) we set out on our hike despite the heavy rain. Like the others, I was reasonably well equipped for this eventuality though my Gore-tex trousers were old and beginning to be porous. The fulsome river that we crossed by footbridge was an ominous sign for the future. But the forest of beech, fir, spruce and hemlock was fresh and green and beautiful and it was a pleasure to be on the trail again despite the rain. We traveled up the right bank for about 10min before recrossing the river and arriving at a trail fork (5480ft) at 5.50am. Here we consulted the maps and talked with another hiker who had paused to rest during his descent. The conclusion was that the trail up the valley may have suffered considerable slide damage during the recent downpours and so we should take the right fork up the steep lateral ridge above us. It was a long tough climb up a steep, tree covered ridge that seemed to be held together by a profusion of tree roots. These provided an almost continuous supply of hand holds and footholds though, in places, the slope was so steep that a rudimentary human-made ladder had been installed along the trail. Finally, about 7000ft the trail leveled out and contoured to the left along the side of the ridge. After passing above several ominous landslide tracks, we arrived at the Shirane-oike-koya (7200ft) at 7.40am.

Until quite recently a large log hut had formed the central structure of the encampment on this shoulder of the mountain. However, several years ago a landslide had wiped out the log hut; now a small temporary shelter serves while the larger hut is being rebuilt. Smaller huts are clustered around the main building and serve as storage, latrines, etc. A tarpaulin shelter in front of the temporary shelter provided us with some relief from the continuing rain. From that vantage point we had a clear view of the steep snow chutes to the south that extended up to the summit ridge of Kitadake. One original plan had been to climb one of these chutes and for that reason I had brought my crampons. In the miserable weather we had encountered that plan had been abandoned.

Soon we set out again and after a few yards passed the small pond that gives its name to this shelter. Several small tents were pitched near the edge of the pond; they looked quite forlorn. But the rain had begun to ease, perhaps because we were climbing through it. The trail switchbacked steeply up the landslide track where the trees were smaller and less dense. Nearing the head of the track, the trail contoured to the right and climbed the steep slope toward the apex of the ridge that would take us to the summit. About 2000ft above Shirane-oike, we arrived at a trail junction where another trail joined from the left. This was the tree-line elevation and from here to the top the landscape was mostly jumbled rock. A short distance beyond the trail junction we achieved the ridge and the trail turned left to follow its apex. Now the wind was much more intense, gusting to about 40mph. At least the rain was minor.

Following the steepening ridge for about 30min, we finally (at 10.40am) reached the Katano-koya or Shoulder Hut (9720ft) on a slight projection from the side of the mountain. The wind howled quite fiercely and we were beginning to chill and so it was a relief and pleasure to take refuge inside the warm and

dark hut. The entry area was floored in stone and a short corridor between a makeshift store and the kitchen led to the central area surrounding an old rusty, wood-burning stove. There were benches immediately around the stove with an access space around the benches. The rest of the space around and behind the center space was a platform raised about 2ft above the stone floor. In the interior this was covered in tatami mats for sleeping space. Nearer the stove space it was covered in tarpaulin to allow hikers to place their wet gear on it. Moreover several smaller kerosene stoves up on the raised flooring provided additional warmth. A staircase led to an attic space and an additional sleeping area. The windows of the hut were small and mostly blocked off. The walls were covered in a makeshift collection of hiking maps, photographs, newspaper articles and other mementoes. It was a rustic, warm and pleasant refuge. Two men, one of whom was the owner (or operator), sat around the hot rusty stove and chatted amiably. We shed our wet outer garments and hung them up to drip and dry before joining them on the benches around the stove. Once we were warmed we set up our lunch and, as we ate, tried to decide what to do. Whether to plan to spend the night in the hut or to descend during this same day. My fellow hikers were inclined to descend - they feared the continuing rain would cause the closure of the Super Rindo Road thus trapping us, possibly for days. They wanted to get down the road while it was still open. But that would mean a very long day of hiking. We had to make the decision here in the hut in order to know what to do about the few dry clothes each of us had in reserve. The decision was made to descend and so we put on our dry clothing.

At 11.55am we emerged from the hut and set off for the summit, leaving our packs at the shelter. Emerging into the bleak day, we were glad to find the rain and wind had eased a little. The ascent route followed the sharp rocky ridge and, in places, required climbing over loose and exposed rock. The surrounding clouds blocked off all of the view that, I was told, could be spectacular on a clear day. We passed the tops of several snow chutes on the left.

At 12.25pm we arrived at the 10474ft summit of Kitadake, marked by several official signs, a number of cairns and a small Jizo statue adorned with the usual, red-cloth offerings. Having labored so hard against the elements we all felt considerable elation and congratulated each other while we took photographs through the mist and the fierce wind. I particularly enjoyed the unusually unrestrained delight on the faces of my hosts.

But we could not afford to dally and soon headed down again, reaching the Katano-koya hut at 1.05pm. There we could not resist another rest in the warm but now crowded interior of the hut; a large group of hikers, male and female, were drying out as we did before striking out for the summit. After about 10min we gathered ourselves, hoisted our packs and set off down the mountain. Yoi was still strong and led most of the way down the seemingly endless switchbacks on the descent to the Shirane-oike hut. The rain was not heavy and the wind eased once we dropped below the summit ridge. About 2.55pm we reached Oike-koya and paused only briefly for I especially did not want to allow my legs to stiffen. And so we headed on to the top of the steep, root-woven descent ridge. Here it was harder going and necessary to downclimb the roots and ladders with care.

Moreover, it began to rain hard so that not only did the trail become a stream in places, but it was hard to keep the rain out of one's eyes. I pressed on ahead as the others began to weaken with exhaustion. After all, we had been hiking continuously for almost 11hrs in quite adverse conditions on a rugged trail. When we finally reached the bottom of the steep ridge, the trail to Hirogawara was truly a river and I was entirely focussed on reaching the shelter at the end of the trail.

The others were now out of earshot and I paused for some minutes at a picnic shelter to allow them to catch up. I could see the car at the trailhead just about 50yds ahead. As Yoi approached, I was deeply struck by his body language and facial expression. Struggling to put one foot in front of the other, he was truly at the end of his resources - and at the end of his ability to hide it. His eyes met mine as he expressed an admiration for my strength. For the first time in our relationship, he exhibited a sincerity free of reserve. In that moment we gained a mutual respect that, I doubt, we would have achieved under any other circumstance. He accepted for the first time my physical strength and resolve, the attribute I had long accepted and admired in him. And I saw for the first time in him, a willingness to show his own frailty and humanity. I felt an affection for him that would not have been possible before. It was a special moment with an irreversible impact.

But it all passed in a moment, and we trudged on to Hirogawara as the rain poured down. It was 5.00pm and we had been hiking almost continuously for about 12hrs. After some debate we decided that any attempt to dry ourselves at the trailhead inn would be futile and so we tried to load our gear and ourselves into the car without soaking the interior.

As we drove back along the Super Rindo Road, waterfalls raged all around us and the whole landscape seemed to be in liquid motion. Arriving at the tunnel, we could not help feeling fortunate that we had escaped before the road was closed. Emerging from the tunnel, we descended toward the South Alps Hot Springs Onsen Hotel where we had awakened that morning. The rain eased somewhat and so both the weather and our spirits lightened as we pulled into the parking lot. The hotel management were kind enough to allow us to use the hot springs once more and so we dug out the few dry clothes that remained and repaired to onsen. After such a physical ordeal, the baths were truly delightful and we lingered long before packing up and beginning our journey back to Tokyo. When we finally parted in front of my hotel amidst the neon of Shinjuku, we exchanged the kind of special goodbyes that only occur at the end of a shared ordeal.



Map of Kitadake hike

5.5 Chokai

- Hiking time: 10 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 9 miles
- Elevation gain: 3400 feet
- Topo Map: Geospatial Authority of Japan Online Map
- Permit: None required

Characteristics

Mountains have always figured large in the religious and social landscape of Japan. Perhaps this is so because in such a densely populated yet mountainous country where the flatland had all been developed for agriculture, the only wilderness left in which to seek privacy for meditation and prayer was in the mountains. Moreover, it was evident that the mountains brought the rain that was so important to the crops, particularly the rice. And so even in the ancient shamanistic belief system known as Shinto the mountains were believed to be the home of the spirits and the place where dead souls went to rest.

Then, in the sixth century came a major influx of Chinese religions and traditions, both Taoist and Buddhist. Shinto beliefs became inculcated with these more sophisticated philosophies and the ancient sacred mountains evolved into refuges for Buddhist monks and hermits. With the growing reputation and influence of these men, their mountain refuges and temples naturally became pilgrimage destinations and venues for annual religious retreats. Sects evolved that combined the ancient traditions with Buddhist beliefs, most notably the movement known as Shugendo or the way (do) of mastery (shu) of extraordinary



Left: Ascending the first snow field. Right: The summit of Chokai.

religious power (gen). Shugendo traces its origin to a legendary ascetic called En No Gyoja who lived near Kyoto during the Nara Period in the late 7th century. It teaches ascetic practices that are to be conducted upon certain mountains and lead to magic religious powers including spirit possession, exorcism and faith-healing. Its leaders are regarded as living “kami” or Buddhas and its followers are known as “yamabushi” (wandering mountain ascetics). To this day, yamabushi, dressed in flowing pantaloons and checkered smocks, make annual pilgrimages on many sacred mountains, visiting the shrines at each of the ten stations (reflecting the ten precepts of Buddhism) on the way up the mountain and practicing a wide array of purification formulas and traditions. When they descend from the mountain they visit their friends to administer blessings from the mountain or perform special services of healing or exorcism.

The religious goals are as diverse as their organization and amount to the application of religious magic to almost any human need. Because of its simple shamanistic roots, its loose organization and lack of specific textual doctrine, Shugendo had a strong appeal for the ordinary folk and became very popular throughout Japan from the 12th century onward. Especially in the north, almost all village shrines came to be served by Shugendo priests.

One of the great attractions of these oriental religions is that they are largely inclusive. This stands in marked contrast to the exclusivity of many western religious sects. The inclusivity means that the shrines at regular intervals on the trails up the sacred mountains (and by extension the less sacred ones) welcome all comers and a tradition has developed of trying to accommodate any and all travelers who come that way. Thus today, the shrines or stations on the popular mountain trails largely serve the secular purpose of providing an overnight rest stop for multitudes of hikers with little or no religious purpose. For a western explorer they provide a fascinating insight into Japanese culture, society and traditions.

Some of the great volcanoes have an association with one particular segment of Japanese society and such is the case with Mount Chokai, the bird (cho) sea (kai) mountain. A great stratovolcano that has erupted 30 times since 573 A.D. (most recently in 1974 when the eruption lasted 2 months), Chokai-san lies



Left: On the summit of Chokai. Right: View to the east.

close to the Japan Sea in a region of northern Honshu known as Tohoku. The shadow that it casts on the Japan Sea is a famous sight known as Kage Chokai. Because of this proximity to the sea, Chokai is the abode of deities who control navigation and the safety of seafarers.

Chokai-san lies on the border between Akita prefecture to the north and Yamagata to the south. In 1704, the peak was the stage for a local dispute between the Yashima clan from Akita and the Shonai clan from Sakata in Yamagata prefecture. The Yashima claimed the Shonai were infringing on their rights. But the Edo government, no doubt influenced by the fact that the Shonai were ten times larger in terms of rice production, ignored the Yashima suit. The temple at the top is said to have been originally dedicated by En No Gyoja to “Chokai Daigongen”, an avatar. The present O-monoimi jinja or shrine at the top was originally located at the seventh stage of the mountain, Nabemori. Up until the Meiji restoration, temple construction was undertaken by both sets of believers. In the Meiji Era, however, the Chokai temple was taken away and the O-Monoimi Shrine was built.

* * *

The narrow road winding up the flank of the massive mountain was dark and deserted on that August morning of the year 2000 as we drove toward the trailhead before dawn. The eerie shadows reminded me of a story I had read in the Mainichi Daily News just a few weeks earlier:

Mainichi Daily News, Monday, June 5, 2000:

BEAR FATALLY MAULS BAMBOO PICKER IN AKITA

Yashima, Akita - A hike on a mountainside here turned tragic after a man picking bamboo shoots was mauled to death by a bear, police said.

Police officers found the body of 62-year-old Shozaburo Kamata on Mount Chokai at around 6:50 a.m. on Sunday. The wounds to his head and arms bore bite wounds and claw marks, and investigators discovered what appeared to be the tracks of an Asiatic black bear near the body. Police have concluded that Kamata died of massive loss of blood.

Officers began searching Mount Chokai on Saturday morning after another man gathering bamboo shoots in the area reported seeing a body lying on the mountainside.

Kamata's family told police that he often went to Mount Chokai to pick bamboo shoots.

The whereabouts of the bear are unknown

Maybe he was just waiting at the trailhead for the next yamabushi - or, better yet, a juicy gaijin!

Trailhead

We were Yoichiro Matsumoto, Takashi Tokamasu and myself. We had set out from Sendai for Chokai Quasi-National Park in Yamagata prefecture the preceding day and had stayed overnight at a guest house or ryokan called Chokai-sanso (“Chokai Cottage”) situated at the base of the mountain, close to the starting point for the Yunodai trail up the mountain. The Yunodai hot springs were one of the featured attractions of the guest house. We had left the inn (elevation 1640ft) in the pitch dark and started up the steep winding road, leaving the developed land behind as we climbed through thick low forest, mostly bamboo but increasingly mixed with deciduous trees. The demons vanished as dawn broke over Tohoku. Soon the sunrise blazed crimson and orange across the mountains of northwestern Honshu and promised a glorious day on the great mountain. After a 20min drive we came to the parking area at the end of the road at an elevation of 3910ft; not much here but a small structure for sightseeing obviously constructed to function in deep snow. And we could now see a number of substantial snow fields higher on the mountain.

Hike

By the time we left the trailhead the red streaks in the eastern sky were turning to orange. The roughly paved trail climbed steeply through thick, low forest. After just 15min we came to a clearing at 4167ft with the substantial, two-storey Taki-no-koya or “Waterfall Lodge”. Interestingly, there was another entrance door at the second level for use under deep snow conditions. This early in the morning it seemed deserted. The benches out front provided a convenient place for us to enjoy the Japanese breakfast that Matsumoto had brought for us, complete with hot coffee.

A substantial stream runs close by Taki-no-koya, and the trail beyond the lodge followed this stream for a few hundred yards to a small snow field. The stream had cut a curious ice-tunnel under the snow field that I had to investigate. Higher up, the water cascaded over a steep rim creating a lovely waterfall. The trail switchbacked through low scrub up a steep and rocky trail, eventually cresting this rim. Beyond it, we found ourselves on a large shoulder on the mountain with an expansive meadow of low bamboo scrub interspersed with grass. Here, after 1hr of hiking, we came to the second lodge, Kawara-juku or “Riverside Inn” beside the stream at 5052ft. It was a more modest, single storey wooden structure containing a tatami sleeping area and a small shrine. This was Shichi-gome, the 7th station on the Yunodai trail.

We stopped to rest on the veranda in front of the inn. The sun seemed to be warming us all in preparation for the next obstacle, visible at the end of the meadow. There on the southern face of Chokai, were two large snow fields or small glaciers. Leaving Kawarajuku, the trail followed the stream along to its origin, the base of the lower and larger glacier. We stepped gingerly onto the ice surface testing the footing. Here, near the bottom, the slope was gentle and the ice surface was sufficiently dirty and dimpled to provide adequate footholds

and friction. Thus we climbed more easily than I expected up the lower slopes of the glacier. When it steepened higher up we moved to the rocky terrain on the left. We passed low woods off to our left, known as Bosa-mori or “Bosa’s forest”. Climbing to where the slope of the glacier eased again, we resumed our hike on the ice and crossed to the right side where the trail in the rocks climbed past the head of the snow field. I noted an interesting yield line or trough across the snow at the top that may have been where the snow began to move. From there, the trail traversed left to another smaller glacier known as Shin-ji-yokee, or the heart-shaped snow field. This we quickly crossed, climbing to the right and coming to a steep, rocky section of trail through thick low brush. The route here is called the thistle trail; it climbs to the top of the ridge that we had been ascending for the past hour.

I pause here to try to describe the geometry of the summit area of Chokai. Unlike the boring cone of many volcanoes, the rugged top of Chokai is sliced through by a great trough that divides the summit pinnacles into two groups and then curves down the side of the mountain, emptying into the foothills to the west. The summit block itself is thus separated by the trough from the great sloping ridge on which we now stood after a 2hr 45min hike from the trailhead. Here at 7000ft the crest of the rim is called Fushi-ogami-dake or “Deep Pray Mountain” presumably because the scene revealed when you attain the ridge is, indeed, awe-inspiring. This point is also marked on the map as the site of Ku-gome, the 9th station, though there was no structure to be seen. But the view of summit was spectacular, the great trough with its snow field curving down from the peak spires and passing below us. In the distance, below the summit block and on the north slope of the trough, we could see the famous temple.

From Ku-gome, the trail follows the south rim of the trough on its way toward the summit. The map says one of the projections from the rim is a peak, Gyoja-dake, named for the famous ascetic but we passed this unknowingly. A 30min hike up along the rim brought us to a trail junction (elevation 7140ft) where we left our packs before the short, 10min walk on up the rim to its highest point. This 7316ft peak is called Shichi-ko-san, or “seven high peaks”, and from it you get a great view across the head of the trough to the collection of rocky spires that make up the summit block. It had taken 3.5hr to climb from the trailhead to here.

From Shichi-ko-san, we returned to the trail junction where we had left our packs and then followed the steep trail equipped with chains down the side of the trough to the ice field at the bottom. Crossing the snow field it was but a short climb up the other side to the temple (elevation 7040ft). Again we deposited our packs and made our way up the steep rocky trail toward the summit. As we neared the top the trail deteriorated to arrows painted on the rocks and some steep bouldering was needed in order to reach the base of the pinnacles on the summit. Arrows pointed to the tallest spire, that could not have otherwise been identified from several equally impressive monoliths. A final section of rock climbing took us to the 10ft by 10ft platform on the top of the highest pinnacle. This summit of Mt. Chokai is called Mount Shinzan (7335ft), or “New man

(peak)", perhaps because it rose to be the highest within the memory of man. It had taken us 4hr to get to the summit.

The drop-off around the summit pinnacle lent added drama to the spectacular 360 degree vista that greeted us at the top, the Japan Sea to the west, and range after range of the mountains covering northern Honshu off to the east. The summit was equipped with the usual small shrine, a carved stone altar of considerable weight. It must have been quite a feat to carry it all the way up the mountain. Offerings on the altar included not just the usual coins but unopened pieces of wrapped candy including chewing gum! Around us were other pinnacles almost as high and we climbed one other to the west of the summit. Too soon it was time to move on and we quickly descended back down to the temple.

From the temple we began our descent by a different route, taking the trail that descends from the temple along the north slope of the great trough. This eventually dropped into the bottom of the trough and followed the snow field that fills it. Near the bottom of the snow field the trail contoured up the south wall to the same rim we had ascended early in the morning but now at a lower elevation. We joined the trail along the rim at a place called Shime-kake, "sacred straw festoon rack" and then continued down along to a saddle on the rim ridge where the trail forked. Here we forked left, leaving the rim and traversing across to a crater lake called Tori-no-umi ("Bird Lake") or Chokai-ko ("Chokai Lake"). We reached here 6hr 45min from the start.

Our water supply was beginning to run low and we were anxious to descend to the stream we thought we detected some distance below us. Consequently we took just a brief look at the lake lying some 100ft below us in an old crater and then returned to our trail. A steep descent of several hundred feet brought us to the base of an ice-field where the snow melt formed a crystal clear stream. Here we enjoyed a marvelous Matsumoto lunch, smoked salmon on French bread, tomatoes chilled in the stream, cheese, mushroom soup, and chilled oranges washed down with ice-cold water and later by hot coffee. It was so good I think I dozed off for a few moments, lying in the soft meadow grass under a warm sun.

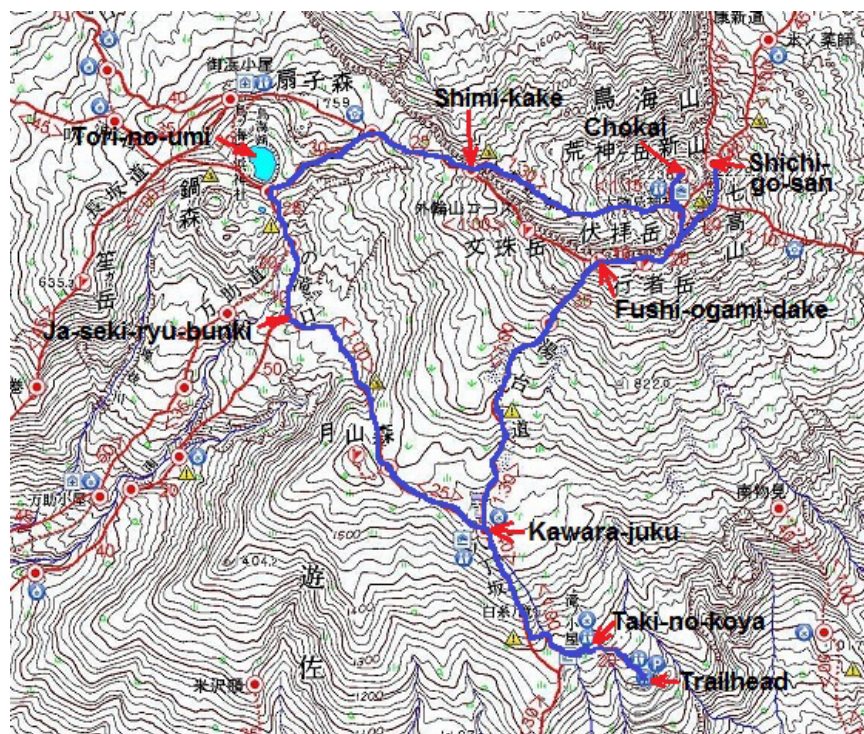
About an hour later, we stiffly resumed our descent quickly reaching the boulder-filled stream bed that runs through the big valley we were now following. Forking left at a trail junction, we came to a relatively flat valley bottom with rolling parkland and a network of streams. Around us were patches of low bamboo scrub and large open meadows with short grass, carpets of flowers and shallow meadow pools. It exuded a sunlit serenity in contrast to the raw mass of the stratovolcano now high above us. But most special were the forests of flowers, saffron lilies and purple foxgloves twinkling in the mountain air. The lilies were the color of sun and the color of monks. It seemed so natural that they should point the way to the house of contemplation high above us.

Day-dreaming our way across this land, we passed another trail junction with the picturesque name Ja-seki-ryu-bunki or "Snake stone stream fork". From there we veered left and traversed across open meadows toward the base of a long high ridge to the east. At the base of this ridge, the trail left the meadows

and climbed up a steep rocky stream bed toward a saddle on the ridge. Near the top the saddle broadened into a flatter meadow area, again with grassland, flowers, pools and streams. Off to the right was a forest named Gassan-mori for the sacred mountain, Mount Gassan (“Moon mountain”) some distance south of Chokai. Gassan had been visible to us most of the day. Cresting a few low ridges the trail brought us back to Riverside Inn about 9hr 30min after the morning start.

Other hikers were resting quietly at the Inn, enjoying the late afternoon sun and the water from the stream. The lilies were beginning to close for the night and the snow fields looked considerably colder. Hastened by the changing light, we gathered ourselves and moved down the trail we had climbed earlier in the day. Passing Takinokoya without stopping, we reached the trailhead just about 10hrs after our morning start. From there we drove back to Chokai-sanso for a most welcome onsen before returning to Sendai.

So another adventure in the land of the rising sun came gently to an end. Sometimes the journey itself, the pilgrimage, is enough for it creates a space in which to consider the world you know and your place in it. When that journey is embellished by the beauty of the mountains and the flowers, it makes it easier to find an equilibrium of the soul. And so it was with this adventure, marked by contemplation of pilgrimage and the beauty of the lilies. Of the color of the flowers and the sun.



Map of Chokai hike

5.6 Hotaka

- Hiking time: 14 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 14 miles
- Elevation gain: 5500 feet
- Topo Map: Topographical hiking map, #5 or Geospatial Authority of Japan Online Map
- Difficulties: Some Class 4 climbing
- Permit: None required

Characteristics

Americans often comment in a rather self-satisfied way on how sexist other countries and cultures are compared with theirs. In such conversations, economically advanced countries such as Japan come in for particular criticism in this regard for prosperity is judged to leave little excuse for outmoded sexist attitudes. Frequently, however, those criticisms are made with only superficial knowledge of the culture in question and without recognition of the multiple facets that comprise any society. As with other stories in this collection, the present tale is an account of a mountain adventure. It was an adventure that yielded unexpected glimpses of Japanese society, insights that I had not recognized before.

Let me hasten to add that I make no pretense that I have studied sexism in Japanese society. This is simply a story, recounting one brief personal experience on the slopes of the mountain known as Hotaka-dake in the scenic Japan Alps. Of course, like any other visitor to Japan I had witnessed the bent old ladies shuffling home through the narrow city streets while loaded down with groceries. I had met the wives of acquaintances who seemed fearful of voicing opinions and intent only on serving every need of the husband and his guests. Of course, I had



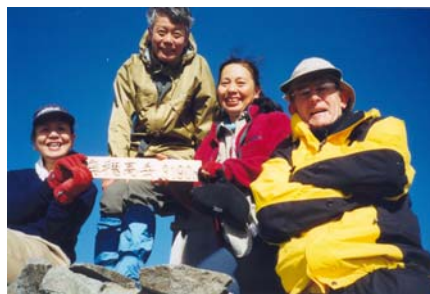
Left: Hotaka-dake from Kamikochi. Right: The upper Karasawa lodge.

heard the indignant stories of western visitors who had been fondled on crowded subway trains. And on one occasion I had even climbed a sacred mountain, the summit of which was off-limits to women.

But, on these many travels in Japan, I had really only had the most superficial encounters with women. Probably, the only contact beyond the superficial had been with Sachie Kamijo, the wife of my good friend Kenjiro Kamijo. Sachie spoke excellent English and had spent a year in California when Kenjiro visited Caltech. She seemed fully in control of her life and surroundings, an equal partner with Kenjiro in all that they did together and as liberated as any American woman. Moreover, I had met dominant Japanese women who clearly ruled the home and, on the trains and in the cities, I had seen numerous groups of independent women enjoying the company of their own sex and embarking on outings and adventures far from their husbands and fathers. In contrast, in a hut high on the slopes of Fuji-san I had spent an evening transported back into some distant time of myth and make-believe when an old woman read the extended story of my life from the wrinkles in my palm (see “Fuji”). Thus the range of intergender relationships seemed as broad in Japan as in the United States and it made me wonder yet again about the injustice of characterizations based on a few anecdotes.

Trailhead

The year was 2002; we were Yoichiro Matsumoto, Nobuhiro Yamanishi and myself and we had come to the resort village of Kamikochi in the Japanese Alps to enjoy these mountains, to climb Hotaka-dake and thus to complete our conquest of the three highest peaks in Japan. As other stories in this collection will tell, the three of us were seasoned companions and we looked forward to another challenge on this storied mountain range. Our spirits were somewhat dampened for we had arrived in Kamikochi in the pouring rain. Several years earlier we had endured endless rain on Kitadake; we hoped that this time it would ease up before the next day when we planned to summit Hotaka-dake. But for now it was pouring.



Left: Karasawa valley from near the ridge top. Right: On the summit of Hotaka-dake.

The best approach to Kamikochi, is to catch a Chuo line express train and travel from Shinjuku in Tokyo to Matsumoto (about 3 hours) the evening before your visit. We had done just that and stayed overnight in Matsumoto at the Ace business hotel just about 100yds from the JR station. Convenient to the bus station and with small but clean and neat rooms at a reasonable cost (Y6500 per night including a bag of breakfast) the Ace was a good choice. It is also wise to visit the tourist information center in the front of Matsumoto station before pressing on. Then take the Highland Express train (Matsumoto Dentetsu Line from platform 7 in Matsumoto station) to the end of the line at Shinshimashima (a 40min journey) and continue on a Highland Express bus for 1hr 20min to Kamikochi. The journey from Matsumoto to Kamikochi takes about 1.5hrs, the last stretch winding up the long and precipitous valley of the Azusagawa river.

Kamikochi, in Nagano Prefecture, is the center of Chubu-Sangaku (Japan Alps) National Park that features the spectacular mountain range known as the Northern Alps. Even in the summer, the Azusagawa river rages down this valley and, judging by the boulder fields, it must be subject to debris flows in the winter. It is the vigor of the Azusagawa that has carved this rugged valley and formed the steep south flank of the North Alps. Kamikochi itself is located nearly 5000ft above sea level at a point where landslides and lava flows (including one from Yakedake in 1915) blocked the normal steep descent and created a narrow flood plain that includes a lake called Taisho Pond and some lovely meadows and marshes. The end of the road is just upstream of the lake and there one finds the extensive facilities built to accommodate the tourists who flock to Kamikochi during the summer season. To avoid total gridlock, private cars are not permitted into Kamikochi during July and August; they must park further down the valley in Nakanoyu. The result is an incredible number of buses parked alongside the narrow road into Kamikochi.

The tourists are justly attracted by the sylvan beauty of this place, the forest and the raging river, the tranquility of the meadows and marshes with miles of manicured hiking trails and the contrast with the rugged mountain ridge looming high overhead. That precipitous row of peaks includes Hotakadake, at 10280ft the third highest summit in Japan (after Fuji and Kitadake). Walter Weston, the Englishman credited with introducing alpinism to Japan, was the first westerner to climb the peaks of the Northern Alps. He summited Hotaka in the early 1890s.

Hike

In anticipation of the rain I had brought my umbrella. Though I felt slightly silly hiking with an umbrella, I was very glad of it; the advantages far outweighed the feelings of silliness. And so it was that, about 8.30am in the morning, we left the bus stop in Kamikochi (elevation 4920ft) and followed the paved walkway to the center of the tourist area, the Kappabashi footbridge over the Azusagawa river (even in the summer, the river would be difficult to cross in any other way). Staying on the right side of the river, we hiked upstream along a dirt road that soon left the tourist area behind. The road continued over level ground

sometimes by the side of the gravel flats deposited by the river, sometimes in the forest itself.

About 55min after setting out, we arrived at 5050ft at the first rest stop, the Myojin lodge deep in the forest. Like all such establishments in Japan, it caters to every hiker's needs and some the westerner would not think of (see below). Indeed Myojin even has its own English language web site (Kamikochi Myojinkan). The intent is thoughtful even if the content is slightly bizarre with several classic Japanese-English phrases:

"You may stay with only walking shoes"

"But nothing need to stay if you like"

"If necessary we recommend you the deposits"

"Shop. Original goods and others"

"Japanese style bigger bath for men or women, may sightseeing"

"Dryer is in the bathroom for women, may use from 15th to 20th"

"At front there's bath bigger towel and so on"

"But if you use e-mail, would you please send us earlier"

"Charge is object to the condition"

With other hikers we paused in the shelter of the overhang for some respite from the rain, before resuming our hike along the dirt road. This continued level on right side of river, passing the Tokusawa Lodge and camping areas (looking quite miserable in the rain). Our spirits brightened as the rain began to ease and almost stopped as we arrived, 2hr 40min and 5.7mi from the start, at the substantial Yoko-o Lodge (elevation 5350ft). This is located beside the river at a major trail junction and so there were crowds of hikers taking full advantage of the break in the rain to enjoy some lunch. We did the same. After a 30min lunch we resumed hiking in better spirits, crossed the Azusagawa and its wash by the large, new suspension bridge and started up a pretty wooded tributary valley on the right side of a lively little river. Climbing steadily through pleasant mixed forest, the trail came to the Motoni bridge (at 5920ft, 4hr 15min and 7.5mi from the start) by which we crossed to the left side of the cascade. At this point the climb steepened as the rocky trail ascended the steep west wall of the valley. To make things still more miserable it began to rain heavily again; indeed it would not ease until we were approaching the lodge higher up the mountain. About 800ft above the Motoni bridge the climb became less steep and the vegetation transitioned to lower scrub and bushes with lovely fall colors. Here it climbs along the open side of a stream toward the rocky moraine at the bottom end of a huge cirque or bowl gouged out of the side of Hotaka. Even in late summer a substantial snow lining remains in the cirque. The trail bifurcates just a few hundred feet below the crest of the moraine. The left fork goes to the lower, older Karasawa lodge in the bottom of the cirque (the campsite beside the old lodge seemed particularly forlorn). The right fork led us to the upper and fancier lodge a little higher up on the right wall of the bowl. We reached Karasawa or "Dry Stream" Lodge (elevation 7710ft) about 6hr and 9mi from the morning start.

Though I had stayed in mountain lodges before, they continue to intrigue me for the small transient community that is created each night is significantly different from what one might encounter in the west. For one thing, virtually all the residents are middle class Japanese (as on past occasions I was the only non-Japanese out of about 100 residents). The uniformity of background yields a common expectation of behavior that makes for greater comfort under crowded conditions. And crowded we were. The lodge was chock full, every inch of space filled either with equipment, with people or with bedding. The first of the two floors of the relatively new structure was occupied with offices, kitchens, dining rooms and bathrooms. Flights of stairs climbed to the second floor where narrow corridors led to about 12 tatami bedrooms devoid of furniture. Each male or female bedroom held about 8 guests; indeed once the eight sets of bedding were laid out there was no floor space left. Hence we were required to leave all but our valuables in the hall. This in turn left only the narrowest channel for movement. Since much of our outer clothing and equipment was soaking wet this did at least have the advantage of keeping the bedrooms dry. It seems to me that anywhere outside of Japan, these arrangements would have inevitably led to complete chaos. Somehow, in Japan, it works and, after the lights were turned out (by an unseen manager) we passed a quiet and restful night.

The lights came on again just before dawn and the first hints of daylight were softening the mountain tops as we packed and breakfasted, intent on getting an early start. The day had dawned dull but dry and we were anxious to take full advantage of the break in the weather. Leaving Karasawa about 5.30am, we followed a narrow trail through the low bushes, climbing steeply up the wall of the rocky bowl to the left side of lodge. It was here that we first encountered two women who, like us, had spent the night in the lodge. Since they spoke no English, I was not privy to the easy conversation that sprang up between them and my friends Matsumoto and Yamanishi. But it was clearly a relaxed exchange. The five of us gradually fell into step with one another since their natural speed was about the same as ours. I was at once struck by how comfortably this relationship developed. There seemed to be little of the guarded wariness that would characterize a similar encounter between a male group and a female group in the west. Indeed the lack of any sexism on either side seemed to me both remarkable and delightful.

The five of us climbed slowly up the side of the great cirque, Matsumoto leading (as always), followed by the stronger of the two women, then by Yamanishi, myself and the second woman. The bushes dwindled as we rose above the tree line and traversed around the side of the bowl. A beautiful panorama began to open up below us, the weather clearing but the valleys spotted with morning mist. The colors of the bushes we had climbed through were more dramatic from this vantage point, slashes of pure scarlet intermingled with green and yellow. About 1hr 10min from the start, at an elevation of 8970ft we paused to enjoy the view at a point where the trail transitioned onto a rocky spine heading for the mountain saddle high overhead. As we did so the sun broke through bringing a moment of delight. Soon we spotted the lodge at the saddle above us. It was a beautiful day and we reveled in our luck for the weather could be

truly awful on the exposed mountain ridge ahead.

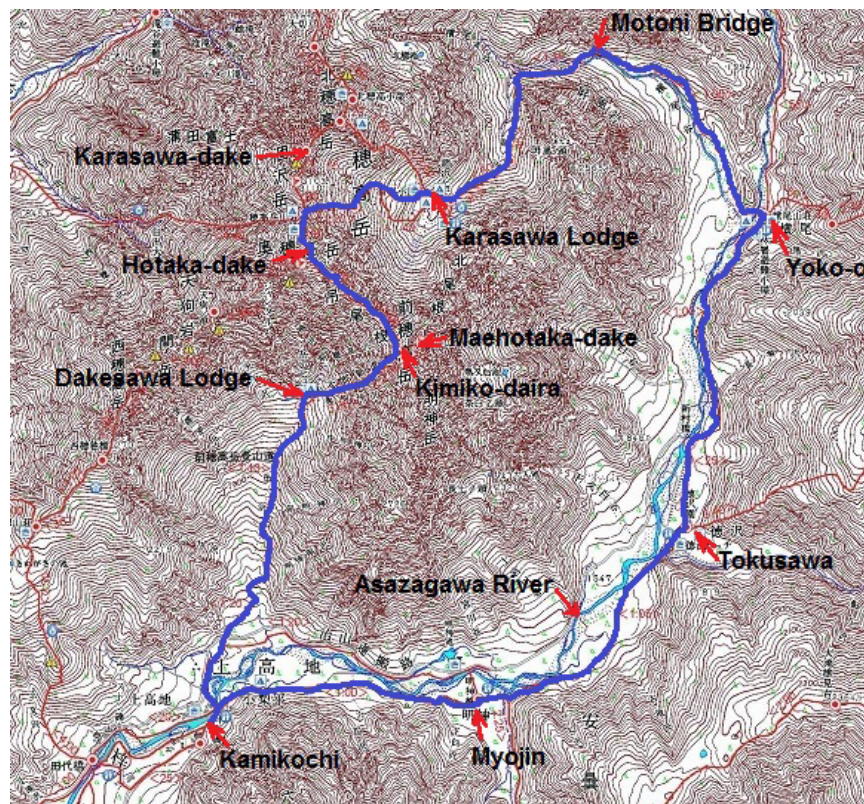
Just 1hr 50min after the morning start, we climbed the last few feet up to the precipitous, 9750ft saddle between Hotaka-dake and Karasawa-dake. A large lodge, Hotaka-sanso, occupies the entire length and width of the saddle with awesome views to the east and west. The ridge to the south rises precipitously from the saddle hiding the summit of Hotaka-dake from view. But the gentler ridge to the north allowed a good view of Karasawa-dake, at 10203ft an easy hike from the saddle. Without further delay we started up the steep wall leading to Hotaka-dake. Wire ropes and metal ladders eased the climb up to the summit ridge and the trail became easier as we ascended. Now, out of the shelter of the mountain, the air was much colder and we were even more thankful for the sun and the dry weather. As we rose, the other peaks in the range revealed themselves, most spectacularly, off to the north, the spear-like summit of Yari-gake (10433ft). Finally, 2hr 40min and 1.3mi from the morning start, the rocky spine we were following culminated in the 10466ft summit of Hotaka-dake. There we were welcomed by a substantial crowd of elderly hikers and by a spectacular 360 degree panorama. Off to the southeast we could even make out the distinctive profile of Mount Fuji. The crowds meant that we had to wait for the opportunity to take our photographs by the small shrine on the peak itself. I wondered whether we would take separate photographs but there was no question of that and we all crowded around the model shrine for the statutory summit shot. I also wondered whether we would now go our separate ways but I later learned that one of the reasons why the women wished to accompany us was that they were unsure of the route.

The wait had chilled us and so we resumed hiking once all the formalities had been completed. We were to descend by a different path and set off along the narrow ridge toward the southeast. This required a number of easy downclimbs before the trail leveled off and contoured around the west side of Maehotaka-dake to a trail junction on a rocky flat known as Kimiko-daira ("flat place") at an elevation of 9450ft. We reached this point, 1.3mi from the peak, 4hr after the morning start. From Kimiko-daira, the trail descends precipitously as it negotiates a spine of the massive headwall of the Alps. There are many chains and metal ladders to guard against a fall. It is a huge and exhausting descent of 2400ft with little respite. We stopped half-way down to have lunch and here we finally learned a little more about our companions. Yone Ikeda (Ikeda-san in polite Japanese) was the larger and stronger of the two women; she had a nephew who studied aerospace engineering at Kyoto University; Ogawa-san was the smaller, quieter one with a nice smile. They worked for a cosmetics company in Osaka and, as was evident from their fitness, they hiked regularly in the mountains near Osaka (Mount Rokko in particular). But this was their first visit to the Japan Alps and hence their uncertainty about route finding. Both women were married with children. During lunch they gave Yamanishi a small treat, Ocha-zuke (rice with tea), that he was surprised to enjoy in the mountains. Of course, I understood little of this at the time; Yamanishi had lived in San Francisco and this experience with western culture made him more comfortable filling in the details for me several weeks later.

As we resumed our descent the vegetation became more luxurious; near the bottom the fall colors were quite marvelous. Finally, after 2hr 20min of descent we came to the bottom of the headwall and to the Dake-sawa lodge ("Mountain valley/stream lodge") at 7119ft. Here we rested and braced ourselves for the final leg. Below Dake-sawa, the trail was easier but still rocky and steep. Gradually, however, it leveled off as we entered the pine forest near the Asazagawa river. Finally the trail emerged from the forest at the edge of the tourist area around Kamikochi.

This was the end of the trail through the wilderness and so we paused by the notice boards to congratulate each other on a great hike and a fine summit. Though we had been together for only a few hours we had already formed a bond that allowed us to enjoy those moments of joint celebration. I was struck by the warmth of that moment, a joy shared both by longtime friends and by two women with whom I could not even carry on the most elementary conversation. Somehow the shared experience in conquering Hotaka-dake had created a trust without words, a communication by deed and gesture. And it was a symmetric relation devoid of sexist bias.

But it was only a moment for soon we were following the tourist trail along the right side of the river and marsh heading back toward the center of Kamikochi. The trail was elevated on planks to preserve the habitat and led back to the main tourist facilities at the Kappabashi footbridge. After a rugged 5.1mi day, we had returned to our starting point 8hrs after the morning start. There we parted from our two new friends who took great delight in my few parting words of Japanese. It had been another marvelous experience in a spectacular alpine environment. As always seems to happen to me in Japan, it had been another adventure with unexpected insights into that delightful culture.



Map of Hotaka hike

Chapter 6

KOREA AND CHINA

This selection of adventures in Korea and China includes ascents of two iconic mountains, Mount Sorak overlooking the DMZ in South Korea and Mount Hua, one of the most sacred mountains in China.



Adventures in Korea and China

6.1 Soraksan

- Hiking time: 10 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 11 miles
- Elevation gain: 4920 feet
- Topo Map: Tourist Map of the East Coast, Jung-ang Map and Chart Service, Seoul, or South Korea 1:50,000 Topographical Map, #NJ-52-6-25, Sokcho
- Permit: Pay entrance fee at trailhead

Characteristics

In the summer of 1992, I was scheduled to attend two conferences in the far east, one in Seoul, Korea, and one the following week in Hangzhou, China. This meant that, along with one of my former students, Steven Ceccio, and other participants, we had an intervening weekend to indulge in whatever activity we wished. Steven and others had elected to spend that time in Hong Kong since that city was a necessary transit point on the way to Hangzhou. They also seemed to be attracted by the shopping opportunities Hong Kong provided, a feature that had no appeal whatsoever to me. Nevertheless, since I thought it might be interesting to see the Crown Colony, my initial flight plan was the same as that of my colleagues.

I think that it was during the long flight from Los Angeles to Seoul that I began reading a guide book for Korea, and started to take notice of the photographs of the rugged and beautiful mountains of Mount Soraksan National Park. Several times I returned to those pictures, and a possible alternative weekend plan began to form in my mind. One of the problems, however, was how to get there. Mount Soraksan, 5604ft high, is in the far northeast corner of South Korea, above the famous 38th parallel, and not far from the DMZ (de-militarized zone) that separates South Korea from North Korea. It therefore lies on the opposite side of the peninsula from Seoul and, although only about 150 miles(?) as the crow flies, the journey is a tortuous one because of the mountainous terrain and the deliberate lack of railways so close to North Korea. To reach the Park, it would be necessary to travel to Sokch'o, a fishing center on the eastern coast. This could be reached either by a 40 minute flight or by a 5.5 hour express bus ride from Seoul. During the first couple of days of the conference in Seoul, my plan began to take concrete shape. If I could catch the flight from Seoul to Sokch'o on Friday afternoon, I could then spend Saturday hiking and catch a return flight to Seoul on Sunday morning in time to connect with a flight to Hong Kong. I finalized this rather tightly scheduled itinerary on Tuesday and looked forward with anticipation to my adventure in Korea. Only one prerequisite remained. With the help of one of the student aides at

the conference, I located a map shop in Seoul where I purchased a hiking map of Mount Soraksan that had some English subtitles.

Trailhead

In the early afternoon of Friday, August 28, 1992, I took the free airport shuttle bus from Hotel Lotte in downtown Seoul to Kimpo International Airport, leaving adequate time to navigate the domestic terminal and catch the late afternoon Korean Air flight to Sokch'o. As I waited for the beginning of check-in to be announced, a message flashed on the screen: the flight to Sokch'o had been cancelled due to weather conditions at that airport. Unlike other parts of the world, that seems to be the end of the story in Asia; you then queue for a refund and are on your own in so far as alternate travel plans are concerned. I sat there bewildered, trying to figure out what to do next. I could return to my original travel plan and give up my visit to Soraksan. Or I could try to find my way to Sokch'o by express bus. The cosmopolitan nature of air travel means that, in airports, one can be fairly confident of finding someone who speaks English should difficulties arise. Bus travel is, however, a completely different story, and so I was somewhat apprehensive about setting off in a bus for a fairly remote corner of Korea. But my sense of adventure got the better of me, and I soon found myself on a crowded city bus bound for the Seoul express bus terminal.

Thanks to a kind lady on the city bus to whom I communicated my destination by means of bus sounds, I alighted at the correct stop next to the large and scattered complex known as the Seoul Express Bus Terminal. Fortunately, each major destination had its own ticket booth and, after some searching, I finally located the Sokch'o booth, identifiable because I had memorized the Korean symbols for that city. The 5.00pm bus was fully booked, but I was able to purchase a ticket for the 5.30pm bus. The bus itself was clean and comfortable. Initially I failed to realize that I had purchased a ticket for a specific seat, and so had to be asked to move from my first stop near the front of the bus. However, my spirits were quickly revived when a beautiful young Korean woman in a red suit took the seat beside me. I guess she had no choice. I had the impression that she was a little taken aback by the strange foreigner in the seat beside the one allocated to her.

The bus set out on time for the five hour journey and initially traveled quickly on a brand new freeway. However, after an hour or so we turned onto a narrower, two-lane road called (somewhat inappropriately) the Yong Dong expressway. This wound its way through the mountains that occupy most of the western part of the Korean peninsula. We passed through very pleasant countryside, valleys filled with farms and separated by ridges of mountains. The land was green, the valleys fertile and the mountains covered in trees. Traffic was heavy on the Yong Dong Expressway and so our progress was slow in places but otherwise the bus traveled quite quickly. At one point the young woman beside me seemed to summon the courage to offer me a can of fruit juice she was carrying. I declined but worried that I might thus have offended her.

Daylight was dwindling as we passed the city of Wonju and the peaks of Ch'iaksan National Park off to the south. With the advent of sunset the young woman and I embarked on our first conversation. Though her English was very limited, we made some progress thanks, in part, to the phrase book chapter in my guide book. Apparently, she worked in Seoul and was returning to her family in Sokch'o for the weekend. Like me, she had been booked on Korean Air and had to make alternate plans when that flight had been cancelled. The bus then arrived at a way station called Hoenggye in the mountains just south of Odaesan National Park. Here restrooms and food-stands were set up to serve the needs of bus passengers. I tried to find something to eat that I both recognized and could consider reasonably safe. I did not do very well. The young woman in red realized this and bought some delicious fried corn that she shared with me when we reboarded the bus. As we resumed our journey through the night, the weather worsened and it began to rain heavily. Worse still for the prospects of my hike the next day, the mist reduced visibility to about 20 yards. In these miserable conditions, the bus followed a long and windy road that descended from the mountains to the eastern coastal plain. We passed close to Kangnung and then turned north, following the coast toward Sokch'o. The bus stopped again at a rest stop where the 38th parallel meets the eastern shore. In Korea this latitude has considerable historical significance. Following the Second World War, Russia, Britain and the United States struck a deal in which Russia was to occupy the peninsula north of the 38th parallel and the United States the land south of that line. The dispute over this boundary eventually flared into the Korean War in which one side and then the other pushed deep into the other's territory. When the final armistice was signed, it established the current border and the broad Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) not far from the 38th parallel. On the east coast the border and the DMZ are some miles north of the 38th and hence the location of the bus stop has real significance for the Korean people. A large monument marked the exact location of the 38th parallel.

My new guide helped me again, this time to get some very-welcome hot coffee and we then set off on the final leg of our journey as heavy rain continued to fall. The bus passed through the coastal village of Yangyang and, a few miles further, the woman in red pointed out the junction where the road to Mount Soraksan National Park joined the coastal highway. By then we had reached the outskirts of Sokch'o and very shortly thereafter stopped at the very rudimentary Sokch'o bus stop consisting of a small, and almost unlit, shelter. Without the help of my new found friend I would have been left standing in the dark and the rain without much idea what to do next. There were taxis that pulled up and embarked bus passengers but none seemed to have any interest in a stranger. However, my friend buttonholed one cabbie who was headed for Sorak and persuaded him to add me as a passenger. And so I hurriedly put my luggage in his trunk and squashed into the front seat. In the rain I had only a moment to thank the woman in red and to say goodbye. I tried to give her my umbrella for she had none and the rain was still pouring down; but I could not make myself understood and she would not take it. Time was too short even to understand what she said when she told me her name. As the taxi raced

away in the rain I was saddened that I would never be able to write to her to thank her for her kindness to a stranger. I also reflected on how often, in the furthestmost corners of the earth, I had met kind and gentle people who had given me help when I needed it.

The cabbie had been directed to take me to Hotel New Sorak where I had a reservation and it was not long before I was checking in. The hotel, that was relatively modern and clearly designed for westerners, seemed almost deserted. Though the guidebook said they spoke English, I had great difficulty making myself understood. Nevertheless I was soon settled in a pleasant room and began organizing my hiking gear for an early start in the morning. As well as my boots, clothes, rain gear and emergency kit, I had brought my small back pack with me in anticipation of a hike such as this. And in Seoul I had purchased some provisions such as bananas, crackers, canned fruit and orange juice. And so I went to sleep hoping that the weather in the morning would be substantially improved. I woke with the dawn, and was delighted to find that the rain had stopped and that the mist had cleared. From my window I could see that the hotel was in a broad canyon in the foothills of the mountains. Below me a fast and full river carried the substantial run-off of the last few days to the sea a few miles to the east. The rugged and steep, tree-covered mountains rose dramatically to the west though the higher elevations were still hidden in the clouds. My excitement grew as I anticipated some marvelous hiking and very soon I was walking up the road toward the entrance to the National Park about a half mile away (at 38°10.38'N 128°29.49'E and an elevation of 680ft). Here a substantial complex of souvenir stands and snack shops had been built to cater



Trailside photographs in lower gorge.

for the bus loads of tourists (mostly Korean school children) who visit the Park every day during the season. But as I walked through at 6.00am, the place was deserted. I intended to follow the trail toward the highest point in the Park that is sometimes known as Mount Sorak or Soraksan but whose proper name is Taech'ongbong Peak. I was not at all sure that I could reach that destination in the time available that day. The summit was about 6mi away at an altitude of 5604ft and my hiking map suggested that it would take 6 hours and 20 minutes to get there. I would have to travel significantly faster in order to make it there and back during daylight.

Hike

The trail is initially broad and easy as it follows the main river valley past a series of snack bars and souvenir stands located at regular intervals along that part visited by the average tourist. It is a delightful valley with abundant mixed forest, waterfalls and pools. The weather was clearing rapidly and allowed me a view of the rugged mountain pinnacles for which this area is so well known. The sun even broke through and made the walking even more delightful. Soon the trail steepened, the canyon closed in and the scenery became more and more spectacular. The Park Service had installed metal bridges and staircases to allow one to cross the river or negotiate particular places that would otherwise have needed climbing gear. These bridges and staircases occurred with increasing frequency as I progressed upstream. The trail itself also became noticeably rougher. In a dry climate like California's, the trails often get ground down to a fairly flat surface; on the other hand the rainfall in this part of the world washes away the finer material leaving a rough, rocky surface that is considerably harder to walk on. Soon I left the tourist area behind and entered the backcountry that only experienced hikers penetrated. I met several groups of hikers who were obviously returning having spent several nights in the wilderness. Here I began to encounter a curious phenomenon. The Koreans are very keen on hiking but the interest is primarily confined to the younger members of the educated class. Most of them have studied English extensively and are usually very keen to take any opportunity to practice conversation with a native English speaker. The further up the mountain I progressed, the more likely it was that anyone I met would fit into this category. Consequently, the further I penetrated the wilderness the more likely it was that anyone I met spoke English. Somehow that seemed very strange to me.

At just about the time I began to feel hungry, I reached a particularly beautiful set of waterfalls and pools and so I sat down to consume my mid-morning meal of bananas, crackers and canned fruit washed down with orange juice. Though odd, the meal was just what I needed for it contained lots of sugar. Soon after lunch, I encountered a young German couple who were descending and stopped to chat. They had clearly become somewhat dispirited by the downpour of the previous day during which they had tried to reach the peak. The rain and the mud had made for very hard going; they had given up the attempt and suggested that I would find it equally impossible. That was mo-

mentarily discouraging for I thought I had been making good progress up to that point.

A few yards later I came upon the first back country rest stop called Yangp'ok Shelter, 3.3mi from the trailhead. Initially, I was not sure what to make of this shelter. It consisted of a small wooden shack with an awning and some benches arrayed in front of it. The front of the shack was constructed like a street vending stall and a limited range of goods were displayed for sale. There seemed to be hard-boiled eggs, candy bars and an assortment of canned drinks. Some of these were recognizable, for example the ubiquitous soft drink cans, Coca Cola, 7 Up, etc. Other products one could guess at by the pictures on the label, for example some of the orange juice cans. But other goods were labeled only with indecipherable Korean letters. All of these goods must be hauled in on the backs of the people who operate the rest stops and tend the vending booths. They seemed friendly though clearly unused to foreigners. The prices were a little high and, I would find out, rose as one ascended the mountain. But that seemed only fair. I purchased some orange juice and candy and also a can of Pocari that I had read somewhere was the Korean equivalent of Gatorade, though the name Pocari apparently means something like pig sweat. At any rate, it tasted very like Gatorade and I was glad to have identified it. Sitting down to enjoy my Yangp'ok snack, the other features of the rest stop came to my attention. A short distance away was a rudimentary two story brick building with openings rather than doors and windows. A number of young Korean hikers were seated in the openings packing their gear and lacing up their boots. I recognized that establishment as one of the hostels I had read about where one could spend the night under a roof for a very modest fee. I wondered, idly, what the place smelt like. But I quickly reprimanded myself for such a culturally-biased thought; chances are it was quite clean though I never checked. Finally I also recognized that the *raison d'être* for this rest stop was the presence of a nearby shrine that I did not visit.



Left: Metal Staircase. Right: Approaching the summit.

Just beyond Yangp'ok Shelter the trail entered a truly precipitous canyon where passage was only possible because of the metal gangways and staircases. In several places these hung precariously from the sides of cliffs several hundred feet above the river. Progress required a good deal of effort to suppress my fear of heights. At the same time the canyon was fantastic, particularly the spectacular Ch'ondang Falls that came into view as the canyon made a left hand turn. Eventually, I came to a point where the canyon leveled out and the metal walkway ended; here the trail left the river to climb a steep and fairly high slope to the ridge above. This climb was quite hard for the temperature had risen and it had become quite humid.

After many switchbacks, I finally reached the ridge and shortly thereafter the second rest stop known as Huiun-gak (at $38^{\circ}7.95'N$ $128^{\circ}27.89'E$ and an elevation of 3540ft), 4.3mi from the trailhead and equipped with vending shack and overnight shelter. Here, again, I purchased Pocari and sat down on one of the benches to enjoy a rest. A number of other young Korean hikers were similarly resting and struck up a conversation with me. They seemed genuinely impressed that an old (and presumably dissipated) Westerner could make it that far in one day and somewhat dubious about my prospects of making it to the top. The man tending the booth also joined in and, through translation by one of the young hikers, pointed out the best way to the summit. Patchy clouds were beginning to roll in as I started up the steep trail that followed a ridge to the summit. Though there were many places where I had to find toe and hand holds to ascend the ridge, the trail was well traveled and the climb was not too difficult so I made steady progress over the last 2000ft. The view at many points was quite spectacular, and made other-worldly by the patchy clouds below me. In several places I could look down over 2000ft to the valley through which I had come. Moreover, one could look north over the DMZ into North Korea though there were no visible signs of that demarcation line. Close to the summit, the clouds closed in completely so it was something of a surprise when the trail emerged onto a broad ridge leading to the peak about a hundred



Left: Huiun-gak shelter. Right: On Taech'ongbong Peak.

yards away. The cairn at the 5604ft high summit ($38^{\circ}7.15'N$ $128^{\circ}27.92'E$) was decorated with several inscribed monuments, including one large one with the Korean characters corresponding to Taech'ongbong, the official name of the peak (5.2mi from the trailhead). Even up here there was a rest stop though it was discreetly placed about a hundred feet down the windswept slope from the summit. Again I bought a can of Pocari; at this elevation it cost about a dollar for a small can. There were some other low huts beside the vending booth but I could not discern whether they included an overnight shelter. I rested for a while and listened to the wind.

I could have tried to descend by a different route but eventually decided to take the safest course and retrace my steps. The descent was tiring and, because of the roughness of the trail, hard on the ankles and knees. By the time I approached the bottom, I was quite exhausted and stopped at several of the tourist shops for orange juice or Pocari. Unlike my passage in the early morning, this time the bottom was filled with crowds of school children. My fatigue made me impatient when they got in my way. They looked at this strange Westerner with puzzlement and I could not help but wonder what they thought. I stopped in one of the tourist shops for some supplies and then, exhausted but exhilarated by a marvelous day of hiking, returned to the hotel and a most welcome rest. After much difficulty, I was able to obtain a tuna fish sandwich from room service and prepared for an early start in the morning.

The morning brought rain and low clouds, and I felt very fortunate to have had such pleasant weather the previous day. I had arranged for a taxi to take me to Sokch'o airport for the early morning Korean Air flight to Seoul. There I would connect with my Korean Air flight to Hong Kong. However, when we arrived at Sokch'o airport, I discovered that my flight was cancelled yet again because of the weather conditions. Others arriving to catch the same flight departed resignedly as though this were a not unexpected occurrence. I protested that I would not be able to catch my flight to Hong Kong. The ticketing agent then engaged my taxi driver in animated discussion, the outcome of which was a plan to get me to Seoul in time to catch the flight to Hong Kong. The taxi driver would drive me to the airport in Kangnung (about 50mi down the coast) in time to catch a flight from Kangnung to Seoul. And so we set off at breakneck speed along the narrow two-lane coastal highway. The driver seemed to revel in the challenge. Many times I closed my eyes and prayed. In the end we made it to Kangnung airport with time to spare and the flight to Seoul allowed me to catch the flight to Hong Kong with little difficulty. It was somewhat depressing to find myself enclosed again by aluminum and plastic. It had been another marvelous adventure in an out-of-the-way corner of a strange land and in a park of enchanted canyons and pinnacles. And I will always remember the woman in red.

Originally published in abbreviated form in the Korea Times, August 30, 1996.



Route to summit of Soraksan

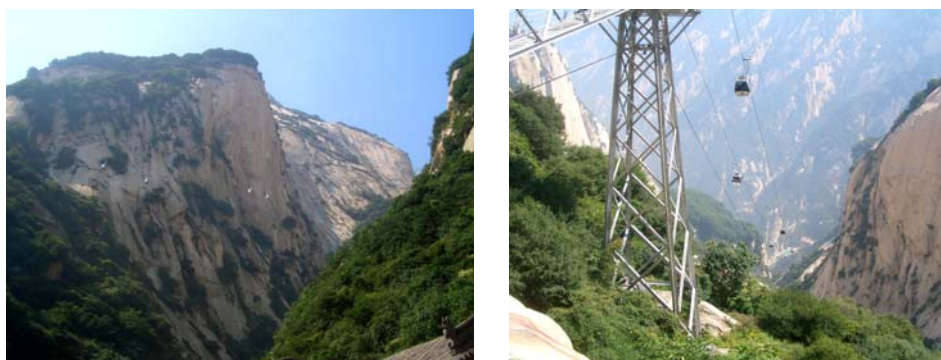
6.2 Hua Shan

- Hiking time: 5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 4 miles
- Hike elevation gain: 1800 feet
- Map: See attached map
- Permit: Entrance fee

Characteristics

Perhaps the greatest of the five sacred mountains of China, the precipitous, multi-peaked Mount Hua (or Hua Shan in Chinese) rises almost vertically up out of the Yellow River basin some 75mi east of Xi'an, the ancient capital of Shaanxi Province in central China. Part of the Qin Ling mountain range, it was (and is) a religious refuge of great significance for the followers of Taoism who believed it to be the home of the god of the underworld. A temple known as the "Shrine of the Western Peak" existed at the foot of the mountain as early as the 2nd century BC and purportedly allowed pilgrims, Taoists, Buddhists and other sects to communicate with the god and his servants. In more recent times, the temple at the base of the mountain became known as Yuquan Yuan or the Jade Spring Temple and is one of the main Taoist temples in China. Of classic South China architectural style with several pavilions surrounding a central pond, a long corridor of seventy-two windows leads to the Huixin Rock that marks the start of the climb up Huashan mountain.

As time went on precipitous trails were carved into the gorges and cliffs to the south and the peaks overhead began to be decorated with beautiful temples that attracted pilgrims from all over China. The first to be adorned was the 5299ft North Peak, known also as Yuntai Feng or the Cloud Terrace Peak, on



Cable cars ascending Hua Shan.

the end of a dramatic ridge high above the Hua Shan gorge. The lowest of the five major peaks, it is nevertheless an awesome and spectacular place of pilgrimage. Today two trails lead up to the North Peak. The traditional route is the stairway of 370 rock steps called the Qianchi Zhuang that begins at the Huixin Rock in the Jade Spring Temple in Huashan village on the plain below. First cut into the rockfaces of Hua Shan Gorge in the 3rd and 4th century AD and improved during the Tang dynasty, its steps snake for 3.7mi up to the North Peak. A second route up to the North Peak originates in the adjacent Huang Pu gorge was also built in the Tang dynasty but fell into disrepair and, until 1949, was only known to local villagers. In that year a group of about 100 Kuomintang soldiers were occupying the North Peak when a small group of Communist soldiers were led up that trail by a local guide, surprised the Kuomintang detachment and took them prisoner. Today that second trail is well-maintained and a modern cable car follows the same route up to the North Peak from Huang Pu gorge. This allows a host of daily visitors to enjoy the spectacular views from the North Peak. They begin by traveling to the bus terminal at the entrance to the Huang Pu gorge ($34^{\circ}31.69'N$ $110^{\circ}5.79'E$ and an elevation of 1460ft) near the city of Huayin some 75mi east of the ancient capital of Xi'an. After purchasing their tickets, they then board a bus that winds up to the cable car terminal ($34^{\circ}29.74'N$ $110^{\circ}5.57'E$) deep within the gorge. From there it is a spectacular cable car ride up between towering sandstone cliffs to the North Peak station at $34^{\circ}29.60'N$ $110^{\circ}4.91'E$.

But the 5299ft North Peak was not the end of the trail for those pioneering pilgrims. To reach the other great pinnacles to the south they needed to ascend a steep, knife-edged ridge just behind the North Peak known as the Canglong Ling or Black Dragon Ridge. Here they carved a fantastic stairway up the apex of the rock-topped ridge that climbs about 1000ft to an only-slightly less daunting, wooded ridge-top where the stairway continues up toward the four other sacred peaks. Until modern times when another parallel trail was built off to the east to allow one-way traffic, the Black Dragon Ridge was the only route to the higher peaks. At the top of the Black Dragon Ridge climb, the pilgrim



Left: The North Peak. Right: Black Dragon Ridge stairway.

passes through the Jinsuo Guan or Gold Lock Pass, so called because one of the traditions practiced by pilgrims to Mount Hua is to emboss their wishes on a gold-colored padlock and to attach this lock to the railings at Gold Lock Pass (and elsewhere along the route). Enormous numbers of these locks have accumulated at Gold Lock Pass, so many that a massive number were recently detached and melted down to create a huge gold-lock statue some 14ft long and 5ft high that was mounted just beyond the pass as a tourist photo stop. At this point just beyond Gold Lock Pass, trails branch off to the 6686ft West Peak, the 6699ft Center Peak, the 6890ft East Peak, and the 7070ft South Peak.

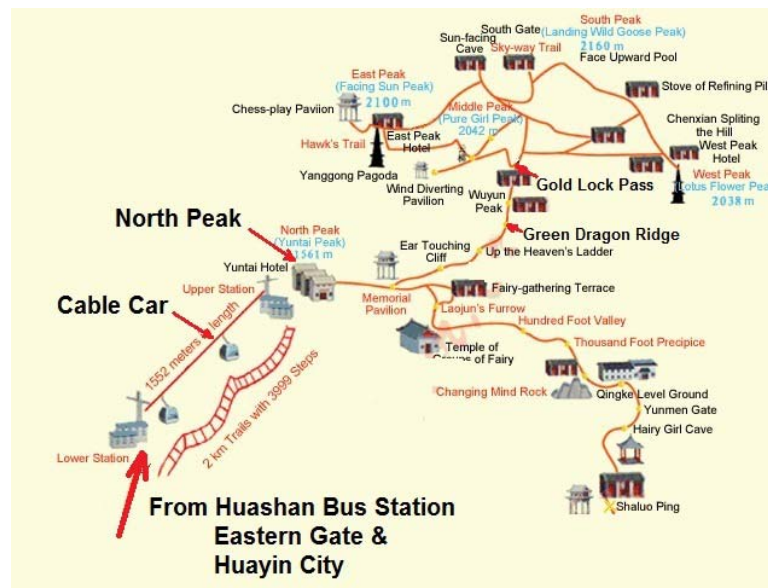
The 6699ft Center Peak lies in the midst of the East, South and West Peaks. A Taoist temple named the Jade Maiden Temple adorns its summit. The name is derived from the legend that the daughter of the emperor Qin Mugong (569-621BC) loved a man who played the Chinese flute (*tung-hsiao*) and she withdrew from the court to become a hermit. Other scenic spots on Center Peak include the Rootless Tree and the Sacrificing Tree, each with their own legends.

But the first stop on a tour of these summits should be the 6890ft East or “Facing Sun” Peak about a 30min hike from Gold Lock Pass. Most of trail consists of stone steps cut into the rock; railings on both sides protect against huge vertical drop-offs on both sides. One very steep section leads to a vertical “sky-ladder” leading from a ledge to a higher rock. Eventually you reach the East Peak where you are treated to a magnificent view of the mountains off to the east. The view of the sunrise is said to be fantastic if you happen to be there at dawn and the weather is favorable. From the viewpoint, one can traverse to the spectacular Chess Pavilion, a small but magnificent folly built on a projection in 1987 on the spot where Chin Shou Huang is said to have played chess with the gods.

Proceeding on toward the 7070ft South Peak, you first descend a steep set of stairs from which you catch sight of Changkong Zhandao, the famous “plank walk”. It is a short but hair-raising detour to the 15ft long plank walkway set in a rock face atop a vertical cliff above a huge vertical drop of thousands of feet. To reach the plank walk you must first descend about 30ft of near-vertical stairway cut into the cliff-top. Attendants will supply you with a safety harness by which you can hook yourself into the cables that run along above the planks. So secured, you may be able to make your way along to the end of the 15ft plank walk where a small cave allegedly represents the long-ago retreat of a Taoist monk. After the plank walk detour you return to the main trail where a comparatively easy walk will take you to the 7070ft South Peak, the summit of Mount Huashan. Another 30min or so will take you past the Center Peak and along the much-photographed knife-edged ridge to the Taoist temple that adorns the 6686ft West Peak. This completes the tour of the Huashan peaks and you begin the descent by returning to the Center Peak (where you may visit another Taoist shrine, the Jade Maiden Temple) and hence to Gold Lock Pass where you begin the long descent down to the North Peak. The Canglong Ling stairway near the bottom of this descent by which you ascended is one-way so you must veer off to the right to descend by an alternate and less precipitous trail. It is a relief to return to easier trails as you approach North Peak and

then the cable car terminal.

As you ride down on the cable car and catch the shuttle bus back to Huayin, it is inevitable that you will marvel at the devotion and persistence of the monks who carved these fantastic pathways into their sacred mountain and who would be astounded (and perhaps shocked) by the crowds who travel from many corners of the earth to enjoy the beauty of their labors and the magnificence of nature.



Map of Huashan

Chapter 7

AUSTRALIA

This selection of adventures in Australia begins with a visit to Fraser Island, the extraordinary sand island off the Queensland coast, and ends with the story of the gruesome events that occurred on the Abrolhos Islands off the west coast of the continent. In between, we visit the spectacular canyons of Karijini National Park in the West Australian outback.



Adventures in Australia

7.1 Fraser Island

- Conveyance: Commercial tour
- Duration: 11 hours
- Vehicle: 4WD Mercedes bus
- Topo Map: Attached map
- Special equipment: Swimsuit and towel
- Permit: Included

Characteristics

Fraser Island, the island of sand, lies off the coast of Queensland, Australia, about 120 miles north of the city of Brisbane. It is the largest island in the world composed entirely of sand and has a structure that is the result of a huge supply of coastal sand combined with an unrelenting onshore breeze. These have created one of the longest beaches in the world, stretching almost unbroken for 75 miles along the east coast of Fraser Island. In a process of evolution that still continues, the on-shore wind then carries this sand up onto a whole series of patches of sand dunes called “sandblows” that stretch inland from the eastern shore. The sandblows are of the order of a mile in width and several miles long. On each, the sand builds up into dunes that move eastward raising the height of the land to over 700ft; these sand mountains drain to both the east and the west. As sand piles up on the beach, this process also results in new land added to the eastern side of the island. In between the sandblows are old dune fields that have been overgrown by brush while the old sand land to the west has been covered by older brush and forest. In places the result is open sandy scrub land;



Left: The eastern coast of Fraser Island. Right: Rain forest on Fraser Island.

in other places it is now dense rain forest. The western coast, sheltered from the Pacific surf and storms, is relatively stagnant, in places dense mangrove swamp, in other places lined with soft beaches. In the central and western parts of the island there are many beautiful, clear water lakes, formed where the drainage has been interrupted by the traveling sand. And everywhere the streams consist of the clearest water flowing over sparkling sand beds with little rock to be seen anywhere. Indeed the absence of rock and stones underfoot or underwater, is just one of the features that make this a very special place, fully deserving its designation as a World Heritage Site.

The wilder northern half of the island is now the Great Sandy National Park; the southern half is managed by the Queensland government as Fraser Island Recreation Area. Vehicle access and camping are by permit only. Visitors either arrive on guided tours in four-wheel-drive buses or in their own (or rented) vehicles. Buses and cars alike drive off the ferry onto the western beach and thence onto the system of rough dirt roads that are the main thoroughfares on the island. In addition, the long eastern beach makes for excellent driving and is the main north/south artery. A network of trails also allows exploration beyond the limits of the rough dirt roads.

The first European to encounter Fraser Island was probably the Portuguese explorer de Menonca who sailed this coast in 1521. During the subsequent 250 years, only occasional adventurers, Portuguese, Dutch and English, came this way leaving little trace and few chronicles. It was first documented in detail by James Cook, who landed on the island (he thought it was part of the mainland) in May 1770 and named many of its prominent features. The pace of exploration increased after Cook; Matthew Flinders landed near the northern cape in 1802 and others followed. The island became notorious in the aftermath of the adventures of James and Eliza Fraser.

In May 1836, the brig "Stirling Castle", Captain James Fraser in command, set sail from Sydney for Singapore. A week later it was wrecked on a reef off what is now Rockhampton to the north of Fraser Island. Taking to the boats, the survivors, including Captain Fraser and his wife Eliza, drifted south for several weeks, eventually landing on what is now known as Fraser Island. There they resorted to walking south but were taken prisoner by a group of aborigines who stripped them naked and made them work. Captain Fraser was speared and died of his wounds several days later. During a two month sojourn on Fraser Island, other members of the group died or were killed. Eliza Fraser and the first mate, Brown, eventually escaped with the assistance of one of their captors (probably an escaped convict by the name of David Bracewell who had been living with the tribe). In the aftermath, Eliza's story was widely circulated. She made many public appearances, retelling her story in more and more graphic detail with each repetition. As a result, the island gain notoriety and was thereafter known as Fraser Island.

The aborigines, a tribe called the Butchulla, had traditionally visited the island on a seasonal basis. In the 1860s they were forced out by the lumber companies who came to harvest the trees of the island's rain forest. That harvest included the valuable satinay trees with wood that had proved quite resistant

to the marine pest that destroyed the ships hulls of the day. Logging on Fraser Island did not finally cease until 1991.

Trailhead

We had traveled to Hervey Bay to visit this unique island of sand. A regular bus collected us from our hotel early one July morning in 1997 for the brief trip to the Urangan boat harbor ($25^{\circ}17.77'S$ $152^{\circ}54.56'E$). There, along with the four wheel drive bus that was to provide our transportation for the rest of the day, we boarded the ferry for the brief voyage to Fraser Island.

Hike

The ferry, built just like a landing craft, headed north before turning east and approaching the beach at a place on the west coast of Fraser Island just north of Moon Point (about $25^{\circ}12.42'S$ $153^{\circ}0.40'E$). There the ferry simply lowered its ramp onto the soft sand beach and the 4WD bus drove down the ramp onto the beach and across it into the scrub forest. We followed on foot and boarded the bus for the cross-island drive.

The sandy road was rutted by regular traffic so the bus bumped and lurched its way along, first across flat terrain coated with strange and wonderful scrub. Gradually the forest thickened with larger and larger trees creating a canopy with a lush undergrowth below. Here the runoff from the high dunes to the east has created a network of crystal streams and clear-water lakes edged with the purest sand. It is the absence of earth and mud that makes this land so strange, so magical. We passed through the Yidney Scrub, home to great stands of virgin Kauri pine, the trees so sought after by the ship-builders for their resistance to marine life. We took a short side trip to visit Lake Garawongera ($25^{\circ}19.80'S$ $153^{\circ}9.58'E$), one of those pristine lakes. A sand goanna was primping itself on the lovely beach when we arrived and only reluctantly decided that the crowd was more than it could tolerate. Our guide recommended that we wash our



Left: The bus drives from the ferry onto the west coast beach of Fraser Island. Right: A sand goanna on the beach at Lake Garawongera.

gold jewelry in the sand by the edge of the lake and the luster of Doreen's gold ring did seem to rise. Back in the bus we drove the last of the 15 miles from our landing beach at Moon Point to Happy Valley (25°20.28'S 153°12.04'E), a rustic resort close to the great eastern beach where signs strongly discourage feeding the dingoes who have become persistent pests. There we lunched in the open-air restaurant.

Refreshed, we mounted our 4WD wagon for the afternoon tour. The bus made its way onto the packed sand of the great 75-mile beach and we were soon sailing smoothly along toward the north in a style in stark contrast to the morning's bump and grind. In no time we covered the 4 miles to where a substantial stream, Eli Creek, empties into the ocean (25°17.78'S 153°13.34'E). A delightful trail meanders inland alongside Eli Creek, allowing one to enjoy the lush tropical forest of banksia and pandanus trees fed by the water of the creek. But the crystal stream devoid of any mud or rocks allows an even more delightful experience, namely a swim down the last half mile or so of creek. With only fine sand on the stream bed there was no danger of scraped knees or toes despite the shallow depths. The sparkling clear water and the lush foliage made this a quite unique experience. I could not resist a second descent.

A couple of miles further north we came to the wreck of the "Maheno" (25°16.03'S 153°14.31'E), a rusty skeleton lying partly buried in the 75-mile beach. More than 50 vessels have foundered on the shores of Fraser Island; indeed the wreckage became of such concern that, in 1870, a lighthouse was constructed at Cape Sandy on the northern tip of the island. But even with the lighthouse, wrecks still occurred. Today, the most visible is the "Maheno", a former luxury liner and World War I hospital ship. In 1935, it was being towed to a scrap yard in Japan when it was blown ashore in a storm. To add to the indignities, it was used for target practice during World War II. Further along the beach, some three miles north of Waddy Point, an Italian luxury yacht, the "Marloo", became beached in 1914 after encountering rough currents on Sandy Cape Shoal. It now lies beneath the surface of the water where it is a favorite dive site.

As we were inspecting the "Maheno" we were amazed to see two light planes approach and land on the beach just a few yards from where we were standing. The pilots disembarked and approached the crowds around the "Maheno". It



Left: The wreck of the "Maheno". Right: The terminal for Air Fraser Island.

transpired that they were seeking passengers for “Air Fraser Island” and offering a brief aerial tour of the island. I could not resist and soon, along with two other passengers, I was roaring along the beach in a Cessna flown by a wizened bush pilot, reputedly the best in the world. No sooner were we aloft than we veered over the ocean looking for sharks. Many seemed to be lazily patrolling the shoreline perhaps seeking Eli Creek descendents who had failed to stop at the beach! Then we turned inland for a close aerial view of the Knifeblade sandblow, one of those great moving dunes that had built the island. Further west we had a good look at the inland lakes and streams before turning for home. It was a special thrill to sweep down and land on the beach, the surf almost within arm’s reach.

But the hours of daylight were dwindling and after a brief stop to see the rain-sculpted cliffs known as “The Pinnacles” we began the long drive back across to the west side of the island. There the ferry was beached, ready and waiting for the bus to cross the sand and drive up the ramp. Soon we were chugging back to Urangan boat harbor. It had been a special day on a unique island, a naturally crystal place of bright sand, sun and surf. I felt like an interloper, especially in the great 4WD Mercedes bus. Maybe only people on foot should be allowed there. But that would be to deny so many a glimpse into another, different and pristine world.



Map of Fraser Island trip

7.2 Knox, Red and Hancock Gorges, Karijini National Park

- Hiking time: 5.5 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: 1.8 miles
- Elevation gain: 300 feet
- Topo Map: Karijini National Park, Western Australia
- Difficulties: 1 rappel of 20ft, 4 long swims over 300ft, one about 1000ft, one protected traverse of 200ft
- Special equipment: Helmet, harness, rappel device, one 100ft rope, about 8 carabiners, wetsuit (all equipment provided on guided descent)
- Permit: Guided Tour with West Oz Active (www.westozactive.com). Price: A\$215
- ACA Rating: 3C III

Characteristics

Karijini National Park, at 6274 square kilometers the second largest Park in Western Australia, is a jewel hidden away in the outback of northwest Australia, in a region known as the Pilbara. This desert landscape is covered with grass called spinifex and scattered with a variety of trees. Huge termite mounds are a feature of the scenery that is almost devoid of people. In the cooler months the land is covered with yellow-flowering cassias and wattles, northern bluebells



Left: The Knox Gorge Slide. Right: At the Knox Gorge exit. Photos by Brydie O'Connor.

and purple mulla-mullas. After rain many plants bloom profusely. The wildlife includes red kangaroos, euros, wallaroos, echidnas, geckos, goannas as well as a large variety of birds and snakes including pythons.

Today the Pilbara is home to a few remnants of the original Aboriginal inhabitants and to some scattered mining operations that, nevertheless, exercise considerable influence over most of the affairs of the region. Karijini National Park (it used to be called the Hamersley Range National Park) is the traditional home of the Banyjima, Kurrama and Innawonga Aboriginal people, the new name Karijini meaning “hilly place” in the Banyjima tongue. Evidence of their occupation dates back more than 20,000 years.

Karijini is special because here the Joffre River and its tributaries have cut deep, vertical gorges into what is otherwise a flat and quite featureless desert landscape. During the summer, rains fill the aquifers in the ancient rock of this land and the resulting springs cause water to flow in the gorges for most of the year. This water has cut narrow and crenelated canyons that provide a number of spectacular canyoneering adventures. About a mile-long stretch of the main canyon is known as the Red Gorge though the watercourse further downstream is known as the Wittenoom Gorge. The Red Gorge lies at the heart of these adventures and, like its major tributary Joffre Gorge, it contains long cold pools bounded by vertical red walls. As described below, some planning is required to comfortably negotiate these pools. The principal tributary gorges that feed into the Red Gorge are Joffre, Hancock, Weano and Knox Gorges. Only Joffre and Hancock can be ascended (though, in the case of Hancock, this requires some technical equipment); consequently all canyoneering adventures consist of a descent through one of these gorges and an end-of-day ascent through either Hancock or Joffre. In this account we describe a descent through Knox Gorge, a trip up Red Gorge and an ascent via Hancock Gorge. In the companion adventure the descent is through Weano Gorge; two alternative ascents of Joffre Gorge are described.



Left: The third pool in the Red Gorge. Right: Entrance to Hancock Gorge.

Since the winter months of July, August and September bring rain and the water is very cold and since the plateau temperatures can be very hot in the summer, the best time to visit is probably in the fall months of April or May. There are only a couple of campgrounds in this widely spread out Park and only one place to find a bed for the night or a meal, namely the new Eco-Retreat (<http://www.karijiniecoretreat.com.au>) that, in addition to a campground, rents tents with beds. The Retreat ($22^{\circ}23.176'S$ $118^{\circ}16.602'E$) is also the hub of all current Park activities and is within hiking distance of the gorges described above. If you plan to follow either of the adventures described here, I would recommend that you sign up for a guided tour with West Oz Active Adventure Tours (<http://www.westozactive.com.au>) based at the Eco-Retreat who provide all the equipment you need. The owner, Danny Francis (email: info@westozactive.com.au), is the local canyon expert. If you wish to canyoneer on your own then you need to have a nationally recognized accreditation to abseil (rappel) and be led by a qualified and accredited leader.

Trailhead

It is not easy to get to Karijini National Park. One way is to drive about 750mi (1200km) north from Perth, mostly along the lonely Great Northern Highway (the park is just north of the Tropic of Capricorn). Another way is to fly from Perth to Paraburdoo, a small mining town whose airport is the closest to the park, and rent a car. This airport also serves the slightly larger mining town of Tom Price, 50mi (80km) away. The Eco-retreat is another 50mi from Tom Price, and a large part of this is dirt road.

This adventure requires a car shuttle. To deposit the return vehicle, exit the Eco-retreat ($22^{\circ}23.176'S$ $118^{\circ}16.602'E$), turn right and drive about 6mi (10km)



Left: The Chute in Hancock Gorge. Right: Looking down Hancock Gorge at Regan's Pool.

to the end of the road at the Weano Picnic Area and the Weano and Hancock trailheads (22°21.476'S 118°17.143'E). Park the return vehicle here and then drive back past the Eco-retreat for 8.5mi (14km) to the junction with Banjima Road. Turn left heading for the Knox Gorge trailhead and overlook. After 2mi (3km) turn left again, following the signs for Joffre Falls/Gorge and Knox Gorge. The road to the Joffre Falls overlook branches left after 1.3mi (2km) but you continue on for 2.5mi (4km) to the end of the road at the Knox Gorge overlook and trailhead (22°22.271'S 118°17.778'E). The trail down to the bottom of the gorge begins beside the information board.

Hike

From the Knox Gorge trailhead information board hike down the steep trail to the bottom of Knox Gorge. You may wish to walk a short distance upstream (right) in order to view a beautiful, verdant pool decorated with Native Fig trees and Paper Bark Gums. Then hike downstream past other small pools as the gorge begins to narrow and the vegetation disappears. About 1hr from the start you arrive at the start of the narrows where you first descend into a waist-deep pool before encountering a notice that warns you of the dangers immediately ahead. A narrow steep section of about 30yds follows before the bottom drops out. You are now at the top of the Knox Slide and there are two descent options. The first option is to rappel down the 35ft drop using the three solid bolts installed in the left wall as the anchor; this rappel requires a swimming disconnect in the deep pool at the bottom. The second and much commoner option is a sliding descent. This involves a slide of about 25ft before being launched into a free-fall of another 12ft. You land in a deep cliff-ringed pool about 35ft in diameter. It is an easy swim to the slot exit from this pool. However the slot is only about 30ft long and, at the end of it, you encounter another vertical drop of about 20ft into another cliff-ringed pool. Here, however, you must rappel since the pool is usually only knee-deep in the landing area. For this rappel there are bolts installed in the left wall. Once at the bottom, the pool deepens near the discharge slot and you must again swim to that narrow slot exit. Here logs caught in the slot ease the climb out of the pool. The exit slot is very short and you almost immediately emerge into the much broader Red Gorge. This exit from Knox Gorge is at 22°21.941'S 118°17.915'E, 0.52mi and 2hrs from the morning start. Your route upstream in Red Gorge is to the left.

At the Knox Gorge exit, you immediately face the first major swim/float though you may choose to swim first to the gravel bar just opposite the exit in order to prepare for the Red Gorge transit. This is where you should deploy any swimming or floating aid you have brought (an inner tube?) for there are four long swims/floats ahead. In particular, a floating aid like an inner tube will allow you to enjoy the splendor of the Red Gorge and to avoid hypothermia for the water of the Red Gorge pools is deep and cold (since they don't get much sunshine). The transit of the Red Gorge from the Knox Gorge exit to Junction Pool involves four long, canyon-filling swims/floats, the first, second and fourth

being about 100yds long while the third is over 300yds long. The boulder flats between these swims are short. The third pool is particularly scenic and decorated with small beaches with fig and gum trees. After the fourth pool you will pass the spectacular, 120ft Weano Falls on your right; a descent of these falls is included in the second Karijini adventure in this collection. Junction Pool is just beyond Weano Falls and encompasses the exits of both Joffre Gorge and the much smaller Hancock Gorge. You should reach Junction Pool at 22°21.688'S 118°17.379'E about 3.5hrs from the start having covered just 1.2mi. Usually there is a welcome patch of sunshine on the rocky beach of Junction Pool and it provides a nice lunch spot. High above Hancock Gorge you will be able to see the Junction Pool overlook that is as close as many tourists get to this gorge.

Parenthetically it is worth noting that there are two possible continuations of this adventure. One possibility that we will not cover here would be to continue upstream through Joffre Gorge. This transit through Joffre Gorge to Joffre Falls is about 2.7mi (4.4kms) long and takes at least 6hrs since it involves many additional swims/floats similar to those of the Red Gorge. The terminus is the spectacular Joffre Falls that are adjacent to the Eco-Retreat. The climb out of the Joffre Gorge is on your right about 50yds before the falls themselves. The ascent route up a steep side canyon is clearly marked with yellow triangles and the trail at the top leads back to the Eco-retreat just about 100yds away.

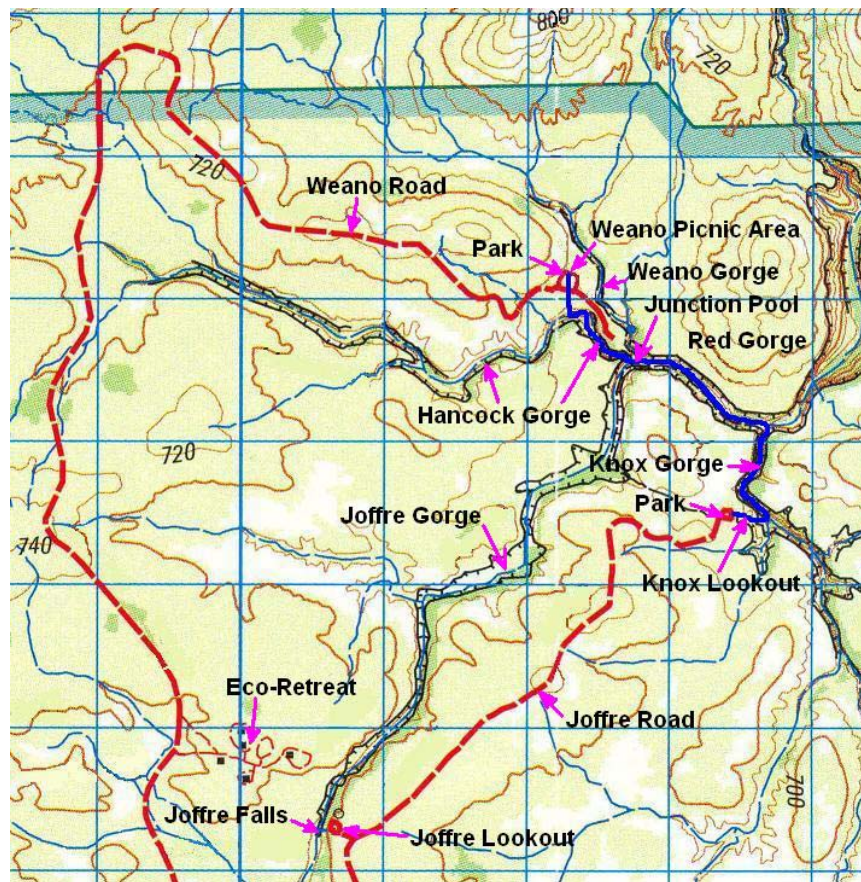
However, we describe here another option, namely an ascent of Hancock Gorge. Not only is this more spectacular but it is also much shorter than the Joffre Gorge option. First you must swim across Junction Pool to the narrow opening leading into Hancock Gorge. Just inside the gorge there is a flat area where you should pack your flotation device and otherwise prepare for the climbing ahead. Just about 20yds into the narrow and deep gorge you turn left and arrive at the bottom of the long narrow cascade known as the "Chute" that drops about 100ft down through some of the oldest rocks in the world. The climb up the Chute is quite straightforward; you should pause to inspect these layer of rock some 2.5 billion years old. At the top of the Chute you turn left and arrive at a much wider and flatter section with a large pool that you can pass on the left or right. This is followed by a small cascade that leads up to the bottom of the cliff-ringed Regan's Pool.

The beautiful Regan's Pool is named after the volunteer rescue team member, Jim Regan, who was swept to his death in the Chute by a flash flood that occurred while he was participating in a rescue in Hancock Gorge. The other rescuers (and the injured person) survived the flash flood by being beached before the Chute. To ascend Regan's Pool you need to follow a high ledge on the left that is equipped throughout its length by secure bolts. The guided tours set up a safety line here and provide each customer with cowtails to secure themselves as they traverse about 60ft above the pool. Non-guided canyoneers should split into pairs and execute a horizontal pitch (or two) using carabiners and the line of permanent bolts to secure their traverse. Care is needed here since the much-used footholds can be very slippery when wet.

Above the short cascade that leads to Regan's Pool you encounter another lovely pool known as Kermit's Pool. This is the point where hikers must halt

during a descent of Hancock Gorge if they are not equipped with technical gear so you may encounter an audience at this point. You can bypass Kermit's Pool on either the left or the right. A narrow section known as the Spiderwalk follows and this ends in a broad section known as the Amphitheater. Here the raw rock of the gorge ends and the canyon becomes more open and greener. You should reach this point about 5hrs after the morning start.

Upstream of the Amphitheater, there are several moderately long pools that can either be waded/swum or bypassed by the narrow ledges on the left. This is followed by a 100yd long section of easy hiking that leads to a ladder on the right that marks the start of the climb out of Hancock Gorge. You climb the 20ft ladder (at $22^{\circ}21.516'S$ $118^{\circ}17.117'E$) and proceed up the steep trail to the plateau above. The Hancock Gorge trailhead and the Weano picnic area where you should find the return vehicle are just a few yards away at $22^{\circ}21.476'S$ $118^{\circ}17.143'E$. The hike should take about 5.5hrs during which you will have traveled 1.8mi.



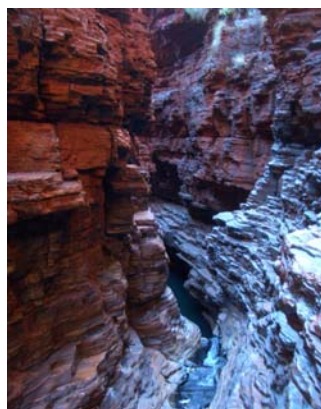
Map of Knox, Red and Hancock Gorges hike

7.3 Weano and Hancock Gorges, Karijini National Park

- Hiking time: 4.5 hours (including ascent through Hancock Gorge)
- Estimated hiking distance: 1.2 miles (1.9 kilometers)
- Elevation gain: 300 feet
- Topo Map: Karijini National Park, Western Australia
- Difficulties: 1 rappel of 130ft, one protected traverse of about 200ft, two swims, one about 200ft
- Special equipment: Helmet, harness, rappel device, one 200ft rope, one 150ft recovery cord, about 8 carabiners, wetsuit (all equipment provided on guided descent)
- Permit: Guided Tour with West Oz Active (www.westozactive.com). Price: A\$215
- ACA Rating: 3C III

Characteristics

The reader is referred to the description of Karijini National Park at the start of the previous adventure. This second canyoneering adventure in this beautiful park is a descent through Weano Gorge followed by an ascent via Hancock Gorge; its parts are therefore interwoven with and interchangeable with those of the preceding adventure.



Left: Pool in upper Weano Gorge. Right: Weano Gorge narrows.

Trailhead

This adventure begins and ends at the Weano Picnic Area, adjacent to both the Weano and Hancock Gorge trailheads (22°21.404'S 118°17.093'E). From the entrance to the Eco-retreat (22°23.176'S 118°16.602'E) turn right and drive about 6.5mi (10kms) to the Weano Picnic Area. Park there.

Hike

From the Weano Picnic Area (22°21.404'S 118°17.093'E) hike past the information shelter and down the steps into the bottom of Weano Gorge (22°21.459'S 118°17.217'E). At the bottom of the steps and just upstream there are some lovely pools that are worth stopping to admire. Then, almost immediately as you start down the canyon, the gorge begins to narrow and there is a canyon-spanning pool where you need to wade. Beyond this is a short section with trees and greenery. But the canyon soon narrows further to a dark slot only about 4ft wide. After about 50yds this slot suddenly opens up to a large circular pool known as Handrail Pool (22°21.568'S 118°17.352'E), 0.4mi and 30min from the start.

Handrail Pool gets its name from the short section of railing that aids your short descent from the slot to a ledge on the left that runs most of the way around the pool. Be sure to use this railing for the footing here is very slippery and falls are a frequent occurrence at this spot. Handrail Pool is deep and makes for a most pleasant swim on a hot day but other opportunities to swim lie ahead. The exit from Handrail Pool is a slightly wider slot and the next section is a deep wade and swim through a dark narrow section of canyon. At the end of the swim the gorge continues narrow, turns and drops fairly steeply to the narrow gate that marks the entrance to Jade Pool. Care is needed here for, again the footing is slippery and, just beyond the entrance, there is a drop of about 10ft to the surface of Jade Pool. There are bolts placed in the wall of the slot leading to the Jade Pool entrance and it is wise to use these to prevent an uncontrolled slide into the pool. The bolts extend through the entrance gate and around to the wide ledge on the right above the pool. You should reach Jade Pool about 1hr after the morning start.

Jade Pool is a deep and lovely swimming hole surrounded and almost enclosed by towering rock walls. Whatever sun filters down turns the water to a



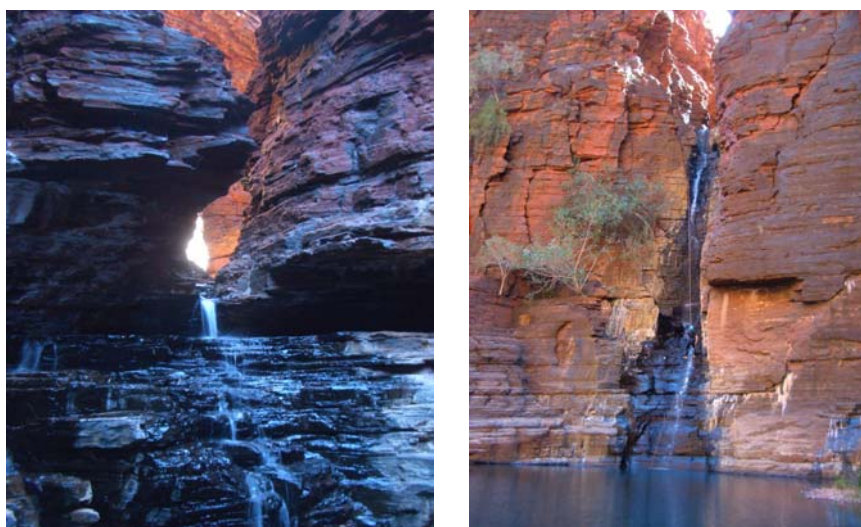
Handrail Pool in Weano Gorge (photo by Brydie O'Connor).

shade of gorgeous pale turquoise. You can proceed along the ledge on the right about 10ft above the water surface or you can jump into the pool and enjoy swimming out through the narrowing exit to another short section of slot. After a short cascade you follow ledges on the right that bring you out to another large open area and pool with broad rock flats to the right. As you come out onto these rock flats you will see ahead of you a window through which you see the far side of Red Gorge. This is almost the end of Weano Gorge. You should reach this point about 1hr 20min after the morning start having traveled just 0.55mi.

The water exits this last big, unnamed pool, proceeds through the window and drops 120ft down Weano Falls ($22^{\circ}21.684'S$ $118^{\circ}17.434'E$) to the bottom of Red Gorge. Ledges on the right through the window lead to the rappel anchor, 2 solid bolts joined by a chain, positioned above the drop down the line of the falls. From this anchor you rappel 120ft down the very slippery face of Weano Falls to a pool with a swimming disconnect. It is a short swim to the rocky beach beside Junction Pool that is just a very short way upstream to the right. You should reach Junction Pool ($22^{\circ}21.695'S$ $118^{\circ}17.364'E$) about 2.5hrs from the start having traveled 0.63mi.

Junction Pool encompasses the exits of both Joffre Gorge and the much smaller Hancock Gorge, with the exit from Weano Gorge just downstream. Usually there is a welcome patch of sunshine on the rocky beach of Junction Pool and this makes for a nice lunch spot. High above Hancock Gorge you will be able to see the Junction Pool overlook that is as close as many tourists get to this gorge.

Parenthetically it is worth noting that there are two possible continuations of this adventure. One possibility that we will not cover here would be to continue



Left: Entrance to Jade Pool in Weano Gorge. Right: Descending Weano Falls.

upstream through Joffre Gorge. This transit through Joffre Gorge to Joffre Falls is about 2.7mi (4.4km) long and takes at least 6hrs since it involves many swims/floats similar to those of the Red Gorge. The terminus is the spectacular Joffre Falls that are adjacent to the Eco-Retreat. The climb out of the Joffre Gorge is on your right about 50yds before Joffre Falls. The ascent route up a steep side canyon is clearly marked with yellow triangles and the trail at the top leads back to the Eco-retreat just about 100yds away.

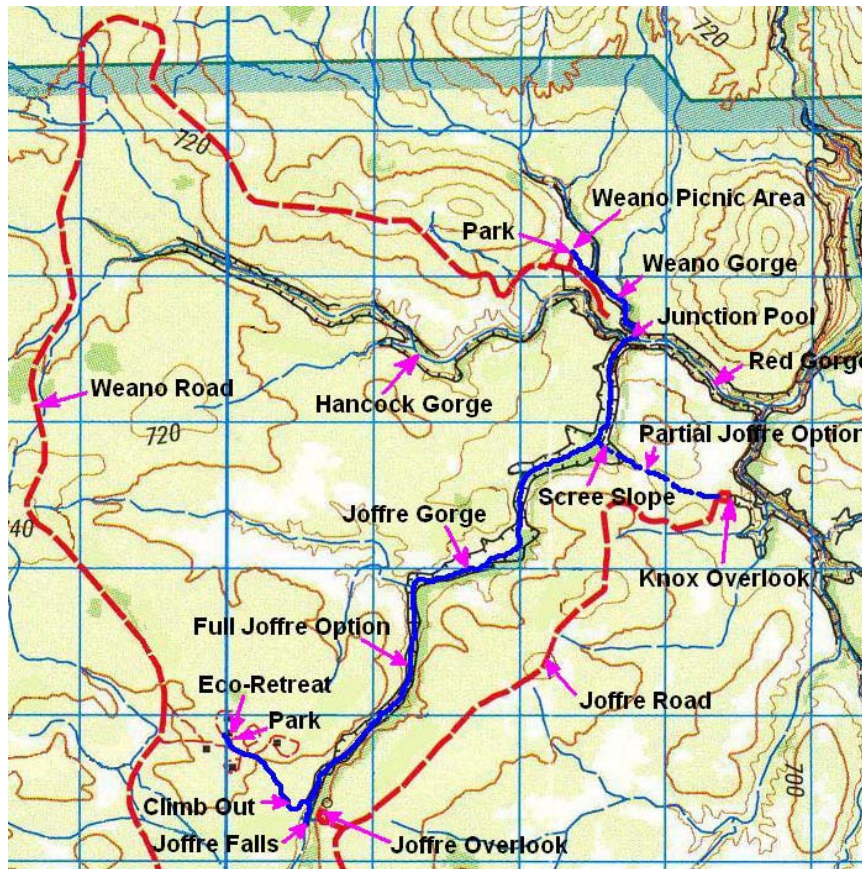
However, we describe here the second option, namely an ascent of Hancock Gorge. Not only is this more spectacular but it is also much shorter than the Joffre Gorge option. First you must swim across Junction Pool to the narrow opening leading into Hancock Gorge. Just inside the gorge there is a flat area where you should pack your flotation device and otherwise prepare for the climbing ahead. Just about 20yds into the narrow and deep gorge you turn left and arrive at the bottom of the long narrow cascade known as the "Chute" that drops about 100ft down through some of the oldest rocks in the world. The climb up the Chute is quite straightforward; you should pause to inspect these layer of rock some 2.5 billion years old. At the top of the Chute you turn left and arrive at a much wider and flatter section with a large pool that you can pass on the left or right. This is followed by a small cascade that leads up to the bottom of the cliff-ringed Regan's Pool.

The beautiful Regan's Pool is named after the volunteer rescue team member, Jim Regan, who was swept to his death in the Chute by a flash flood that occurred while he was participating in a rescue in Hancock Gorge. The other rescuers (and the injured person) survived the flash flood by being beached before the Chute. To ascend Regan's Pool you need to follow a high ledge on the left that is equipped throughout its length by secure bolts. The guided tours set up a safety line here and provide each customer with cowtails to secure themselves as they traverse about 60ft above the pool. Non-guided canyoneers should split into pairs and execute a horizontal pitch (or two) using carabiners and the line of permanent bolts to secure their traverse. Care is needed here since the much-used footholds can be very slippery when wet.

Above the short cascade that leads to Regan's Pool you encounter another lovely pool known as Kermit's Pool. This is the point where hikers must halt during a descent of Hancock Gorge if they are not equipped with technical gear so you may encounter an audience at this point. You can bypass Kermit's Pool on either the left or the right. A narrow section known as the Spiderwalk follows and this ends in a broad section known as the Amphitheater. Here the raw rock of the gorge ends and the canyon becomes more open and greener. You should reach this point about 4hrs after the morning start.

Upstream of the Amphitheater, there are several moderately long pools that can either be waded/swum or bypassed by the narrow ledges on the left. This is followed by a 100yd long section of easy hiking that leads to a ladder on the right that marks the start of the climb out of Hancock Gorge. You climb the 20ft ladder (at 22°21.516'S 118°17.117'E) and proceed up the steep trail to the plateau above. The Hancock Gorge trailhead and the Weano picnic area where you should find the return vehicle are just a few yards away at 22°21.476'S

118°17.143'E. The hike should take about 4.5hrs during which you will have traveled 1.2mi.



Map of Weano, Hancock and Joffre Gorges hikes

7.4 Abrolhos Islands

- Conveyance: Shipwreck Special tour with Geraldton Air Charters
- Duration: 8 hours
- Topo Map: Attached map
- Special equipment: Swimsuit, snorkel, swim fins, towel

Characteristics

The Houtman Abrolhos are a collection of tiny coral reef islands at 29°29.490'S, 113°47.793'E, some 50 miles out in the Indian Ocean west of the present town of Geraldton, Western Australia. In the early 1600s, though the continent of Australia was still undiscovered, the dangerous reefs of the Abrolhos were a documented hazard to shipping. Despite this, in the small, dark hours of Jun.4, 1629, the ship “Batavia”, bound for the East Indies with 322 people on board smashed into one of those reefs. She was the newly-built pride of the Dutch East India Company, 650 tons and 186 ft long. The Batavia was doomed though she stayed in tact on the reef (now known as Morning Reef) for some days allowing most of the 322 passengers and crew and large quantities of food and water to be transferred to a small nearby island in the ship’s longboat and yawl. However, some 40 crew members were drowned as the ship broke up. The “Batavia” represented a huge investment for the Dutch East India Company and was loaded with treasure to be used to make an even greater profit from the spices it would carry back to Amsterdam. She had left that port at the head of a small fleet, with the expedition commander, Francisco Pelsaert, in charge while Ariaen Jacobsz served as captain of the “Batavia”. Even before the wreck, Jacobsz and the expedition second-in-command, Jeronimus Cornelisz, had planned a mutiny that they hoped would make them very rich from the treasure in the hold. They recruited a number of fellow mutineers and had deliberately and surreptitiously



Left: Replica of the Batavia. Right: Replica of longboat that sailed to Batavia.

separated the “Batavia” from the rest of the fleet. Moreover, they persuaded several of their fellow mutineers, including Jan Evertsz, to carry out a vicious gang-rape of one of the female passengers, Lucretia Jans. They hoped that this would produce an over-reaction from Pelsaert that, in turn, would allow them to entice the rest of the crew to rise up in mutiny. Pelsaert, however, shrewdly decided to wait until they reached their destination in the Dutch East Indies before resolving the matter. This intention was interrupted by the shipwreck.

At that time the mainland was an unknown, nearly-barren and waterless desert with only a sprinkling of aboriginal inhabitants; so there was no hope of rescue or succor there. Despite the huge distance, Pelsaert and Jacobsz with a number of passengers and sailors (including Evertsz) set off in the small 30ft longboat for the Dutch port of Batavia (now Jakarta, Indonesia), some 2000 miles to the north. In a remarkable feat of seamanship, they reached Batavia some 33 days later. The captain, Jacobsz, who was deemed responsible for the wreck was promptly jailed by the Governor of Batavia for his part in the planned mutiny while Evertsz was hung for his part in the rape.

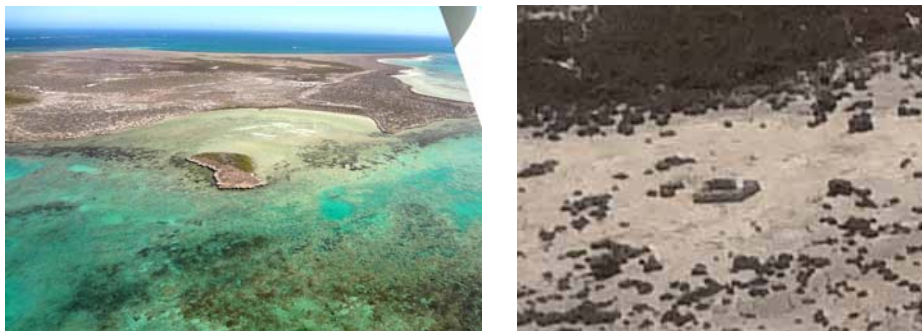
Meanwhile, back in the Abrolhos, panic and chaos set in when it became clear that the water and food from the “Batavia” would only last a short time and there appeared to be very few resources on the tiny island (now known as Batavia Graveyard or Beacon Island) where they had been landed. The mutineer, Cornelisz, took advantage of this chaos to establish his own murderous dictatorship, aided and abetted by the other mutineers. Once he had marshaled all the food, weapons and rescued treasure under his control, he began a systematic program of murder and rape, designed to allow the food and other resources to last as long as possible. First, he had to deal with the threat to his plans posed by a small group of soldiers who had been on board the “Batavia”. On the pretext of seeking their help to search for water on a nearby island, he had them transported there in the only remaining boat, namely the small yawl. Cornelisz promised he would come and get them when they lit a fire signaling the end of their search. However, his real plan was to let them die of thirst and hunger on that nearby island so he did not respond as promised when the



Left: Batavia graveyard with Morning Reef behind. Right: Site of Batavia wreck (light blue spot).

signal fire was lit. However, under the leadership of one of the soldiers, a man called Wiebbe Hays, the soldiers did not panic. Though they found no water on the original island to which they had been transported (known today as East Wallabi Island) they were able to wade to a nearby island (West Wallabi) where they found not only a natural well of fresh water but also a plentiful supply of food from seals, shellfish and even small wallabies that lived on the island. A natural leader, Hays organized his small band of abandoned men so that they not only survived but prospered.

Back on Beacon Island, Cornelisz and his henchman began their program of murder and rape. All those who were not useful for their work in fishing and providing other services (including sexual services) were gradually eliminated and buried in shallow graves. This included many women and children. A few managed to escape to Wiebbe Hays' island. In this way the soldiers became aware of Cornelisz's horrendous pogrom and began to fashion crude weapons with which to defend themselves against the muskets and sabers of the mutineers. Cornelisz soon realized that he must make an effort to eliminate the soldiers in case any rescue vessel might turn up and reveal their horrific deeds. Hays and his men built small forts on top of the cliffs surrounding their island and fashioned catapults and pikes from driftwood material, some of which came from the wreck. When the first attack by Cornelisz's men was launched, the soldiers were ready. They bombarded the mutineers with catapulted rocks fired from behind the fort walls so that the mutineers fled before they even reached the shore. The second assault several days later was similarly repulsed. Then Cornelisz changed tactics and sought a parley with Hays and his men. With his fully armed henchmen Cornelisz landed on the shore of West Wallabi and attempted to gain military advantage by duplicity. But as soon as Cornelisz made the first move, Hays and his men overcame the mutineers, killed some and took Cornelisz prisoner. Just at that very moment, Pelseart and his new crew appeared on the horizon in a rescue vessel; they had not only sailed south from Batavia but also managed to locate the tiny Abrolhos in the vast Indian Ocean. Both soldiers and mutineers raced from the islands attempting to be the first to reach Pelseart. The mutineers had planned to overwhelm the rescuers



Left: Wiebbe Hays' Island & assault bay. Right: Wiebbe Hays' fort.

and take over their vessel. However, Hays and his men got there first and, thus forewarned, the rescuers overwhelmed the mutineers and took them prisoner. The horrendous pogrom of murder and rape was finally over but there had to be some consequences.

Before leaving the Abrolhos, Pelsaert carried out a rigorous investigation of what had happened in his absence. The evil of Cornelisz was soon uncovered and Pelsaert felt he was empowered to mete out just punishment rather than try to transport a large number of dangerous men back to Batavia. Gallows were erected on a nearby island for the day of reckoning. There Cornelisz was hung after having his hands cut off. Some of his henchmen were similarly butchered before being hung. Two of the younger mutineers were set free on the mainland with a few provisions but were never seen again. Other, lesser mutineers were transported back to Batavia to await trial though most were ultimately hung. Of the original 341 people on board the “Batavia”, only 68 made it to their original destination.

The only real heroes of the whole terrible affair were Wiebbe Hays and his assistants; they were rewarded by the Dutch East India Company but then faded from history. The forts they built are the oldest European structures in Australia and can still be seen today on West Wallabi Island. A statue of the revered Wiebbe Hays, a man from very humble beginnings, stands proudly in the city of Geraldton, a symbol of his strength of character, military ability, natural leadership, and courage.

Knowledge of the wreck site was rapidly lost though the story of the “Batavia”, the mutiny and the aftermath was preserved in the meticulous records of Pelsaert and some of the passengers. The remains of the “Batavia” (including many cannons and some unrecovered treasure) lay undisturbed in shallow water for over 300 years. Eventually, in the 1960s and 70s many of these artifacts were recovered and a surviving section of the hull was raised and reassembled in the Maritime Museum in Fremantle, Western Australia. Also reconstructed in the museum was a stone archway that had been destined for the Dutch East India Company headquarters in Batavia. Excavations on Beacon Island also uncovered many human graves and confirmed their violent deaths. The exhibit



Left: Rat Island. Right: Turtle Bay.

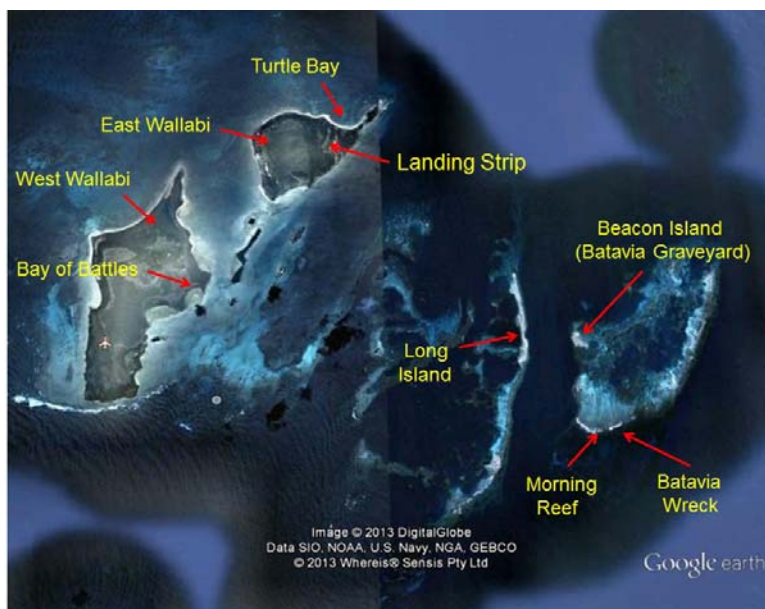
in the Maritime Museum also includes many other artifacts. My visit there first brought the story to my attention. I bought a book that detailed the story and became fascinated by the saga; I simply had to see the Abrolhos for myself.

On Mar.6, 2013, I drove 300 miles north from Perth to the town of Geraldton where Geraldton Air Charters run day trips by small plane out to the Abrolhos. A total of five of us had signed up for the “Shipwreck Special” the next day. I arrived at the Geraldton Air Charters office at Geraldton Airport (28°47.71’S, 114°42.11’E) about half an hour early and chatted with others in the office/waiting room. Many of the Abrolhos Islands have leased properties where fishermen have built shacks and jetties for their boats. The fishermen and tradesmen who serve them use the air charter service for quick trips back and forth to the mainland. Moreover, there is a black pearl farm and a lively rock lobster fishing business on the islands. These are also served by the air charter company. One of the waiting passengers was a carpenter on his way to repair a shack; another was a fisherman off to his shack for the long weekend.

After a pre-flight briefing by the pilot and guide, Ben Joseph, the five of us, along with a co-pilot in training by the name of Jeff Lawrie, squeezed ourselves into the little plane and prepared for an exciting trip. It was a beautiful, West Australian day, with blue skies and just enough wind to freshen the air. We flew over Geraldton at an elevation of about 3500ft and out over the Indian Ocean. Within 30 minutes we arrived at the most-southerly group of islands (the Pelsaert group) that make up the Abrolhos and the pilot took the plane down to about 500ft so that we could get a good view. After circling over several of the Pelsaert Group of islands (Post Office Island, Pelsaert Island) as well as two wreck sites (Zeewijk in 1727 and Windsor in 1908) we headed north for the middle island group, the Easter Group that includes Rat Island, almost overrun by fisherman’s shacks. Then north again to the northernmost group, the Wallabi Group where the “Batavia” was wrecked and the ensuing drama played itself out. At low altitude we passed over West Wallabi Island where Wiebbe Hays and his men survived (28°27.75’S, 113°41.72’E); we even spotted one of the simple rock-walled forts that they constructed and the bay where they repelled the mutineers invasion. Then, circling to the north, we landed on the dirt landing-strip on East Wallabi Island (28°26.21’S, 113°44.15’E) and parked the plane among low brush.

It was a beautiful day so it was a delight to disembark on this remote and pristine island. Just a short hike took us to Turtle Bay on the north side of the island, a magnificent bay and beach, where we took refuge from the sun under a small shelter. Only about 40 yards off-shore was a coral reef and we swam out with our snorkeling gear for a spectacular visit to the reef with its marvelous variety of life. This included the rockfish that are harvested on many of the other islands and shipped to mainland markets. After lunch, a short walking tour of northern point of East Wallabi Island found us a fish eagle, ospreys, and various sea birds as well as skinks, lizards, and, best of all, a collection of small wallabies, the descendants of those that sustained Wiebbe Hays and his men. Then back to the plane for another low altitude tour, this time of the islands that make up the Wallabi Group and that featured so dramatically in the “Batavia”

saga. First over West Wallabi Island, Wiebbe Hays' stronghold, and then over to the Batavia Graveyard (or Beacon Island) itself ($28^{\circ}28.54'S$, $113^{\circ}47.17'E$), now the site of a number of fishermen's shacks. In the one view, we could see the relationship between the Graveyard, the nearby Morning Reef and Long Island, upon which the chief mutineers were hung in full view of the survivors of the massacre. As we circled over Morning Reef itself we could discern the precise location of the wreck (about $28^{\circ}29.39'S$, $113^{\circ}47.73'E$) since it has left a bare sandy spot (light blue in color) amid the dark sea grass just a short way behind the wave-break. It seemed an appropriate final view of the Abrolhos Islands as we turned for home after a spectacular day in a truly beautiful place. Strange to think of such horror in such a magnificent location.



Map of the Wallabi Group, Abrolhos Islands

Chapter 8

TWO PERSONAL STORIES

This idiosyncratic collection of adventure stories is brought to a close with two personal, sentimental favorites, one from the deserts of Lawrence of Arabia and the other from the tropical jungle of Peru.

8.1 Hejaz Railway

- Driving time: 4 days
- Off-road driving distance: 700 miles
- Topo Map: Attached map
- Difficulties: 4WD vehicle travel over rough terrain

Characteristics

On this, the second night of their grand adventure, they had formed the four-wheel-vehicles into a circle beside the rusted remains of an old steam engine, half buried in the sand. Making their camp here under the desert stars, they lit a fire to ward off the chill of the desert night, to focus their conversation and companionship. Talk turned from their tiny and distant homeland of Northern Ireland, to the vast and empty expanses of this Saudi nation. From the great romance of Lawrence of Arabia who wrecked that steam engine, to modern Middle Eastern



Train in the sand. Photo by Sami Sabat.



Bridge over a wash. Photo by Sami Sabat.

politics and, inevitably in this day and age, to the wonders of computers, the internet and global communication. They reflected how search engines had allowed a connected people who had dispersed throughout the world to find each other and to communicate again though separated by many thousands of miles - even when that diaspora reached into places as remote as this northwestern corner of the great Arabian desert. Justin listened as his friend described how he had recently used a new search engine to rediscover a great friend from his college days. He resolved to try that when, after this adventure, he returned to the hospital in Riyadh where he was currently employed. But, for the moment, the present adventure was all-consuming and many hundreds of miles of the historic Hejaz Railway would challenge them in the days ahead. For Justin and his friends had set out to follow the route of the Hejaz Railway all the way from Tabuk ($28^{\circ}23.27'N$ $36^{\circ}33.55'E$) to Medina ($24^{\circ}28.12'N$ $39^{\circ}36.65'E$), a distance of about 700 miles across one of the most forbidding deserts in the world. The rails and even the sleepers had long ago been borrowed for other purposes, but the raised embankment of gravel and rock along which the railway ran is still extant and can be followed in four-wheel-drive vehicles.

The Hejaz Railway was originally built to transport Islamic pilgrims from Damascus to Medina. For untold centuries before, the only method of travel was by camel caravan and the journey would have been arduous and dangerous. The one-way journey alone would have taken about two months. Travel through winter's freezing temperatures and torrential rains, or through the scorching heat of the summer would have been unavoidable. Settlements along the way were sparse and hostile tribes, no doubt, compounded the difficulties. But around the end of the 19th century, the Ottoman empire that dominated the region north of the Arabian peninsula and battled the Arab tribes in an effort to expand into the great desert, raised about eight million pounds from sources such as the Turkish sultan Abdul Hammed, the Khedive of Egypt, and the Shah of Iran to allow construction to begin. That construction posed multifaceted challenges. The engineering problems alone were considerable, since the ground was solid rock in some places, soft and drifting sand in others. Moreover, torrential rain storms would occasionally create flash floods, wiping away bridges and banks and causing the line to collapse. Yet most of the year water was in precious



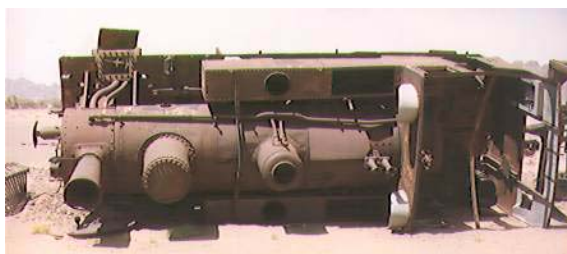
Left: A garrisoned station. Right: Rolling stock at Mada'in Saleh. Photos by Galen Frysinger.

short supply. In addition, the construction crews had to contend with open hostility from local tribesmen and from camel caravan owners whose livelihood was clearly threatened by the railway. Thus most of the construction and maintenance of the line became the responsibility of the Turkish army. Of course, that was part of the Ottoman strategy for the railway would allow the empire to exert a control over the region that was otherwise impossible.

The railway was finally opened in 1908 and business boomed in the next few years; the number of pilgrims taking the train mushroomed from 30,000 in 1912 to 300,000 thousand in 1914. In addition, the Turkish government was able to transport a substantial army into the heart of Arabia. But, with the outbreak of the First World War, the pre-existing struggle for dominance of the region between the Ottoman and British Empires, flaired into open aggression. Recognizing the strategic importance of the railway (as well as its vulnerability) the British encouraged the local tribes to cripple that supply line. The most famous instigator of this activity was Thomas E. Lawrence, the legendary Lawrence of Arabia. Many of the trains he sabotaged still lie where they were wrecked. After the war, the Ottoman Empire was dismantled and, though some of the northern sections of the Hejaz Railway continued to function, the long stretch through the Saudi desert melted away leaving only skeletons in the sand. Much, however, still remains to be seen along the deserted route of the railway. The stations, built about 12mi apart, served more as armed watch towers than as stops along the way. Their robust construction meant that they continue to preside over the empty desert.

Adventure

Justin and his friends had resolved to follow the route all the way from Tabuk (28°23.27'N 36°33.55'E) in the northwestern desert to the terminus at Medina (24°28.12'N 39°36.65'E), a distance of some 750mi. Their four wheel drive vehicles had been “shipped” to that desert oasis, and there they began their southward journey. The going is rough but not excessively difficult since the rails were removed long ago, and local farmers used the iron sleepers as building supports and fence posts. In the grey, rocky hills outside Tabuk, the expedition first encountered the station at Al Awjariyah, a two-storey fortress built from natural grey stone. From there, following the track along the Wadi Saba for



Train in the sand. Photos by Sami Sabat.

about 8mi brought them to another station, where the track seems to double back on itself. From there it enters a deep gorge and then into a tunnel. The eighth station, Ad Dar Al Hamra ($27^{\circ}20.73'N$ $37^{\circ}47.93'E$), is situated at the end of a wide, flooded section of the wadi and was built near the ruins of a Turkish fort that they enjoyed exploring. A subsequent station at Al Mutalla has several overturned carriages lying beside it. At Mada'in Saleh ($26^{\circ}48.48'N$ $37^{\circ}56.78'E$), the station is more extensive with an enormous old engine house, containing several rusting steam locomotives.

The station at Al Sawrah, about 72mi south of Al Ula, is one of the most scenic. Situated in a wide, beautiful wadi, the three station buildings are constructed of an attractive yellow stone. Just outside the station one can see the shells of a couple of old pick-up trucks, probably the remains of an attempt to rehabilitate the railway line. Some 21mi south of Al Sawrah twisted iron rails lie buried beside the remains of an engine, sitting bolt upright in the sand despite being some distance from the track itself. An explosion ripped open the metal at the back of the engine and wrecked bogies, blown apart from their carriages, lie nearby. Nothing seems to have changed since 1917. It is not hard to see Lawrence's white robes glinting in the desert sun. Further south is the site of the first mining of the Hejaz Railway at Aba el Naam ($25^{\circ}13.73'N$ $38^{\circ}49.45'E$).

Willie Howard and his wife Janine had journeyed from Lisburn in Northern Ireland to join Justin and two other families on this historic adventure. Thus the talk turned to their native land, to the scarred and battle weary city of Belfast. It was a joy to rekindle their origins but the talk left a shred of sadness as they remembered the lost connections with others that had left to seek a better life in distant lands. Yet there was now new hope of reconnecting. Just as in a bygone age when the advent of railways had allowed families to reconnect, now the internet allowed one to find friends and relatives in the most distant corners of the globe.

Epilogue

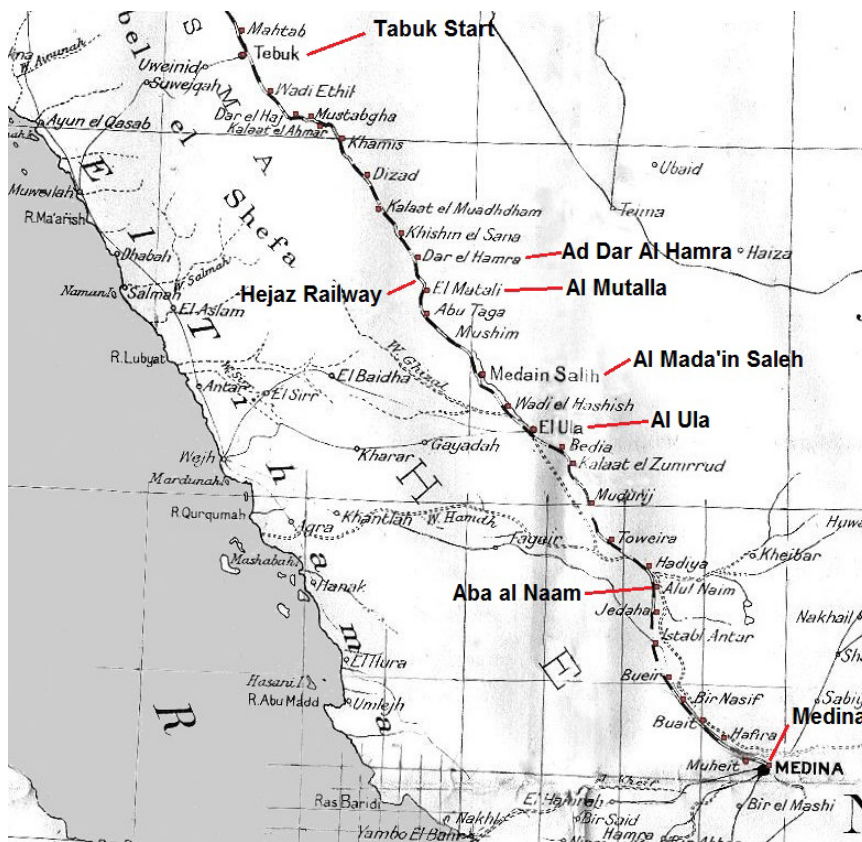
Back in Riyadh, Justin logged onto the Internet and began his search by entering his name into the search engine Google. The number of responses was overwhelming but he soon learned to enter additional words to more narrowly focus the search. Suddenly, there it was - his father's name, his mother's name, even a brief mention of their lives together and of their children. There was even an old photograph of his grandmother as a young girl, standing in a portrait of his great-grandparent's family. All on some webpage he had never seen before on a website somewhere in the United States. In the vernacular of his homeland, Justin was gobsmacked!

But he found my name at the bottom of the webpage and the name rang a bell in his distant memory. He vaguely recalled the visit many years ago that he made with his mother and sisters to a village called Magherafelt some 35mi from Belfast where some distant cousins lived. He remembered the boys a few years older than he and the mother who had been such a good friend of his own mother many years before. Indeed his mother had acted as bridesmaid when

Wilfred Brennen and Muriel Earls were married in the oncoming shadow of the Second World War. It was strange what the brain was capable of remembering when triggered by a word, a sound or a glimpse.

More importantly for the present, Justin found my e-mail address alongside my name and quickly rushed off a message through the new railway of the ether. He also e-mailed his older sister, Caroline Thorpe, who had lived within thirty miles of me for thirty years without knowing either of us was there. So it was that just two days later, I got a second e-mail from Caroline. She, it turned out, was the administrative assistant to the publisher of the Los Angeles Times. About a year earlier, the California Institute of Technology where I work, had held a reception for the publisher of the Los Angeles Times. Caroline had attended that reception. I had attended that reception. We undoubtedly saw each other at the reception. Yet we could have had no idea of each other's presence.

It seems really amazing to me that two relatives had come so close without realizing it. Instead it took a casual conversation around a campfire in a strange and remote land plus the magic of the internet for us to make contact and renew the genetic bond. Some technologies make us poorer as human beings; the internet, on the other hand, has an ability to truly enrich us.



Map of the Hejaz Railway, Saudi Arabia

8.2 Huayna Picchu

- Hiking time: 2 hours
- Estimated hiking distance: less than a mile
- Elevation gain: 820 feet
- Topo Map: Attached map of Huayna Picchu
- Permit: Sign in at trailhead

Characteristics

We had come to this stupendous and storied place to enjoy a shared adventure, perhaps for the last time. This would be a reenactment of a family tradition forged some thirty years earlier when the girls were just a few years old. Adventure was in their souls, perhaps even in their Scotch-Irish genes. Almost forty years before our small nuclear family had left the comfort of a Northern Irish homeland and ventured half way around the world, seeking new spaces in which to grow and prosper. Husband and wife, we had arrived in California with two small daughters, two large suitcases and two hundred dollars; all we had in the world. Since that brave journey there had been joys and sadnesses, triumphs and tragedies. Some the result of happenstance, some caused by the same venturesome spirit that encouraged us to reach for the sky.

It had been this way as long as any of us could remember. There had been the long car camping trips throughout the western United States, thousands of miles in a slightly faulty but stylish 65 Mustang to explore every reachable geological oddity or anthropological remnant. We had hiked as far as children's legs could take them, into the Virgin River Narrows, through the Hoh rain forest, up to the glaciers of Mount Rainier and out to a myriad of other places. We had often ventured off-trail to find places others had not seen whether in the rugged and precipitous canyons of the San Gabriel mountains, the wondrous maze of



Left: Machu Picchu Right: Huayna Picchu Photos by Danamichele Brennen.

rocks in Joshua Tree National Park, or the canyons of the Colorado plateau, anywhere something new or exciting might be found. Mishaps were, of course, inevitable. In those early days, they rarely meant more than an unexpected dunking or a twisted knee. Sometimes they even meant dangling on the end of a rope for a short time before being rescued. In later life and in different circumstances, there were sometimes more serious consequences.

As the eldest daughter she had left home first, traveling across the continent to make her life in an eastern city. She had married an older man, only to discover after two children that their interests and personalities had diverged to the point of rupture. In the heat and trauma of that dissolution, she had become a little derailed. One awful night, Jan.5, 1999, that led to a terrible accident. Driving too fast late at night on icy asphalt, her red 951 Turbo Porsche left the road and smashed, driver side first, into the trees. She was trapped upside down for hours, her lower body crushed among mangled metal. It took more than two hours for the firemen to cut her loose and load her into the helicopter for the short flight to the University of Pennsylvania Hospital. There the doctors diagnosed multiple fractures of the pelvis, two broken femurs, a broken right ankle and numerous lacerations. Orthopedic surgeon Christopher T. Born took on the daunting task of trying to reconstruct the lower part of her body. She was very lucky to have found herself in the hands of this skilled surgeon who performed five operations to reconstruct the pelvis (using five permanent pins), to align the femurs (using a rod through the core of one femur) and pin the ankle together with several permanent screws. She spent two months in the University of Pennsylvania hospital and another month in a rehabilitation hospice in Bryn Mawr. Then many agonizing months with daily physiotherapy in order to walk



Left: Climbing Huayna Picchu (photo by Danamichele Brennen) Right: Tunnel on Inca trail, Huayna Picchu.

again. This too was interrupted by a final operation in the fall to remove the rod from the femur. It took patience, persistence and much pain as well as valuable help from her ex-husband, Bill O'Brien. But her innate optimism and irrepressible spirit equipped her for the struggle and within the year she could walk again, albeit slowly and with a limp. Her case was so unusual that Dr. Born published a research paper on it. But she was not finished with the repair and by the summer of 2000 was able to send him a photograph of her rock climbing in Kings Canyon National Park, a picture that he proudly included in the verbal presentation of his paper at a scholarly symposium.

But she still limped, was still impaired in her movements so there was still work to be done if she was to live the kind of active life that she had been brought up to and that she wanted for herself and her children. There would be no more horse riding but there could still be great adventure.

Now she stood beside me in the midst of the lost city of the Incas. With her sister we had traveled to Peru and flown to the Incan capital of Cuzco. There we paused for several days in that beautiful sky-high city, partly to acclimatize and partly to enjoy the Incan and Spanish colonial history of the place. One guided tour took us to the huge Spanish colonial cathedral of Cuzco, built on the foundations of Incan palaces and richly decorated with imperious, gilded images. During that visit there occurred a moment that augured for something special in our own lives. Standing in the imposing nave of the cathedral, the daunting plumage all around, the cathedral bells began to toll slowly. Moments later the whispers could be heard everywhere and nowhere, "El Papa murio, el Papa murio,...". It was April 2, 2005, and Pope John Paul had just died half a world away. I could not help but be reminded of my own mortality, of the need to relish these special days with my two beloved daughters; "... never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee (John Donne, 1623)."

A couple of days later we caught the early morning train that laboriously switchbacked its way up the mountains surrounding Cuzco and crossed the altiplano before descending again into the deep valley of the Urubamba river.



Left: Inca temple on Huayna Picchu. Right: On the summit of Huayna Picchu.

Heading downstream through the ever-deepening gorge we left the dirt roads behind us just northwest of Ollantaytambo, only the railway and the raging Urubamba penetrating the deepening jungle beyond that point. Finally, five hours from Cuzco, the train edged into Agua Caliente (at $13^{\circ}9.29'S$ $72^{\circ}31.51'W$), a jumble of vendor stalls, hotels and restaurants squeezed into a strip of jungle between the Urubamba and the towering cliffs. We had come to the land of cloud forest and the mist hung in great clumps over the heights above us. A raft of buses were waiting for the train and we were soon switchbacking our way up the dirt road toward the ridge, 1300ft above the Urubamba, a ridge where the Incas built their magic city of Machu Picchu. We spent the day there, first on a guided tour, and then in our own explorations. The day tours left in mid-afternoon and thereafter we enjoyed the lack of crowds and the improving weather as the mists cleared and the sun began to peek through. It was a glorious afternoon in a magnificent place.

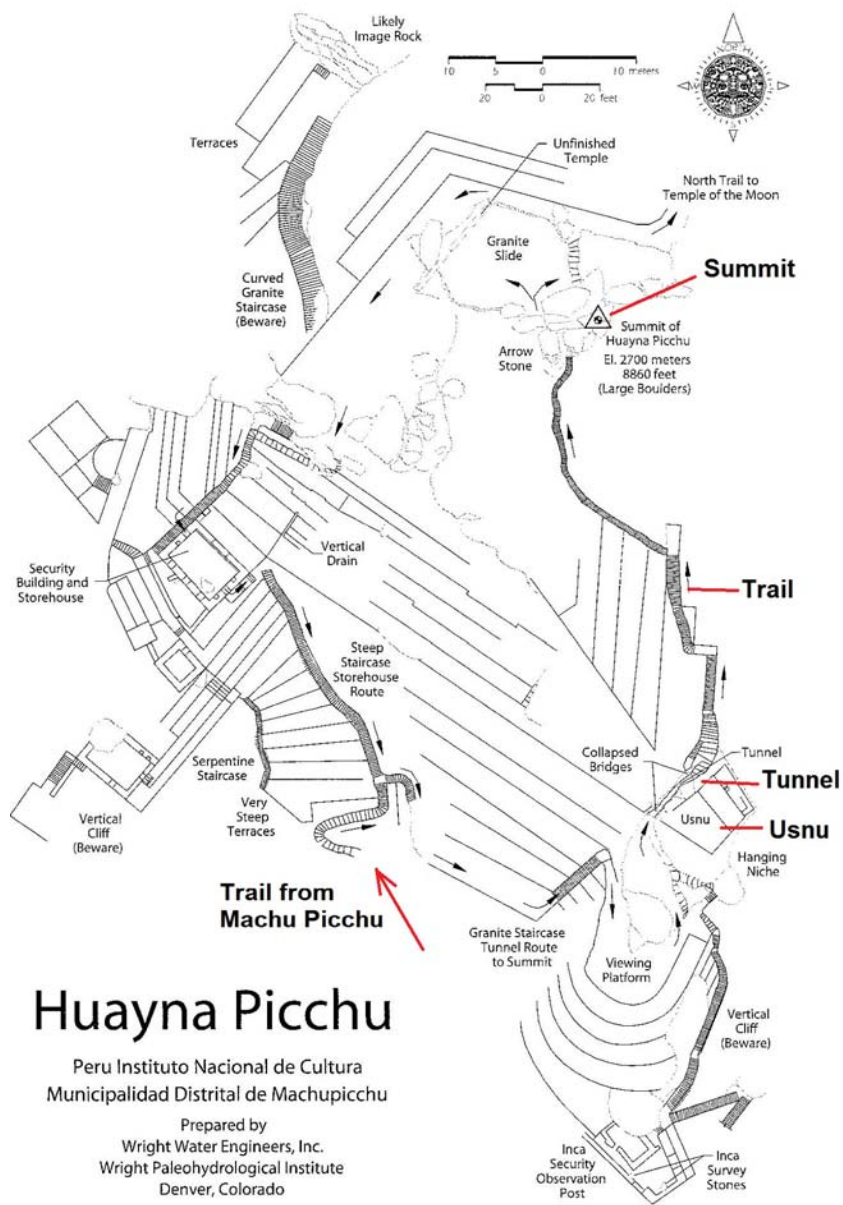
Though much of Machu Picchu's history is shrouded in mystery, the most widely held view is that the city was built by the Inca emperor Pachacutec in the mid 1400s and that it served as both a ceremonial and agricultural center. The astronomical alignments of its temples and monuments are very sophisticated and the extensive agricultural terraces may have been used to grow plants adapted to the wet jungle climate rather than the drier Inca heartland. Some think that Machu Picchu's isolation may have led to a decline prior to the Spanish arrival in Peru. What is certain is that it was completely abandoned before it could be discovered by the invaders; Pizarro marched right past it on his exploration down the Urubamba. This was great good fortune for Machu Picchu was rapidly overgrown and for centuries lay hidden in the jungle, one of the very few Incan cities to escape destruction by the Spaniards. Not until 1911 did the American archaeologist Hiram Bingham uncover its hidden splendors.

The city was built on a narrow ridge that lies inside a sharp, 180° bend in the Urubamba river. It is a natural fortress site, easily defended since the 1300ft drop down to the Urubamba is nearly vertical on three sides. On the fourth side, overshadowed by the 10,040ft Machu Picchu mountain, the Inca built a wall, a gate and various guard houses to protect the city. At the other end, the far end of the ridge, a precipitous basaltic column rises like an exclamation mark to a sharp summit, another 1000ft above the city. This awesome pinnacle, known as Huayna Picchu, was sacred to the Incas who managed to build some remarkable structures on its precarious summit. In several places their paths and terraces look down over 2300 vertical feet to the Urubamba.

Somehow during the rest of that day and evening, as we relaxed at our hotel in Agua Caliente, a plan to climb Huayna Picchu crystallized in our minds. None of us were quite sure we had the strength after our exhausting travels and the toll that the altitude had taken on our constitutions. When the morning came Kathy, my younger daughter, did not feel well enough for this extracurricular exploit and resolved to spend the morning resting among the Incan ruins. Dana had done nothing like this climb since her accident and so it became an unexpected but welcome test of her long rehabilitation.

So it was that in the morning mist we crossed through the lost city to its northwestern end where, at 7875ft, the ridge narrows to a knife-edge. There the Incas built a shrine and guardhouse, a hut (at $13^{\circ}9.74'S$ $72^{\circ}32.80'W$) that still serves the same purpose, for those who set off to climb Huayna Picchu today must sign in and sign out when they descend again. It is not quite clear what the authorities would do if someone failed to sign out; drain the Urubamba? We duly signed in and started along the rough trail that first descends about 100ft in order to cross the narrow spine (at $13^{\circ}9.66'S$ $72^{\circ}32.84'W$) that connects the main ridge top with Huayna Picchu. The climb up the steep trail toward the summit starts immediately and rapidly steepens; the ancient steps cut into the rock are sorely needed as are the ropes that have been added for modern climbers. We paused often to inhale gulps of thin air. Then on again. Dana climbed easily, exuding a delight in finding final confirmation that she was no longer handicapped; indeed she often had to wait while I caught up. Nearing the summit, the jungle around us merged into Incan walls and soon we were ascending the first steep staircase through those terraces. This led to the first great platform with a fantastic view of Machu Picchu and the land all around us. From this platform the trail proceeded through a short tunnel, emerging beside an "usnu" or holy site with walls built above a 2000ft vertical drop all the way down to the Urubamba. Then more stairs along the edge of that awesome cliff before we arrived at the jumble of giant boulders that adorn the summit. Climbing through and over several of these, overhanging the same huge drop, we finally gained the 8860ft summit of this awesome peak ($13^{\circ}9.44'S$ $72^{\circ}32.83'W$).

As it turned out, Dana had conquered Huayna Picchu with some ease and certainly no limp. Nevertheless the accomplishment symbolized a long and painful struggle, a rehabilitation that had been as much spiritual as physical. It would have been so easy, so comfortable to take refuge in the handicap, to let all those metal pins and rods bear the burden. To make the matter harder, along the way she had to deal with a host of other challenges that would have broken a lesser spirit. So this moment was one of rightful, jubilant celebration. I was and am deeply proud of what my daughter overcame and that pride as well as her joy are etched in the faces of the photographs we took that day. The Incas had carved a soaring condor into the face of the summit boulder. It seemed an appropriate symbol for what she had accomplished.



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